

Famous Artists Painting Course
Famous Artists Schools, Inc., Westport, Connecticut

Section **5**

Composition

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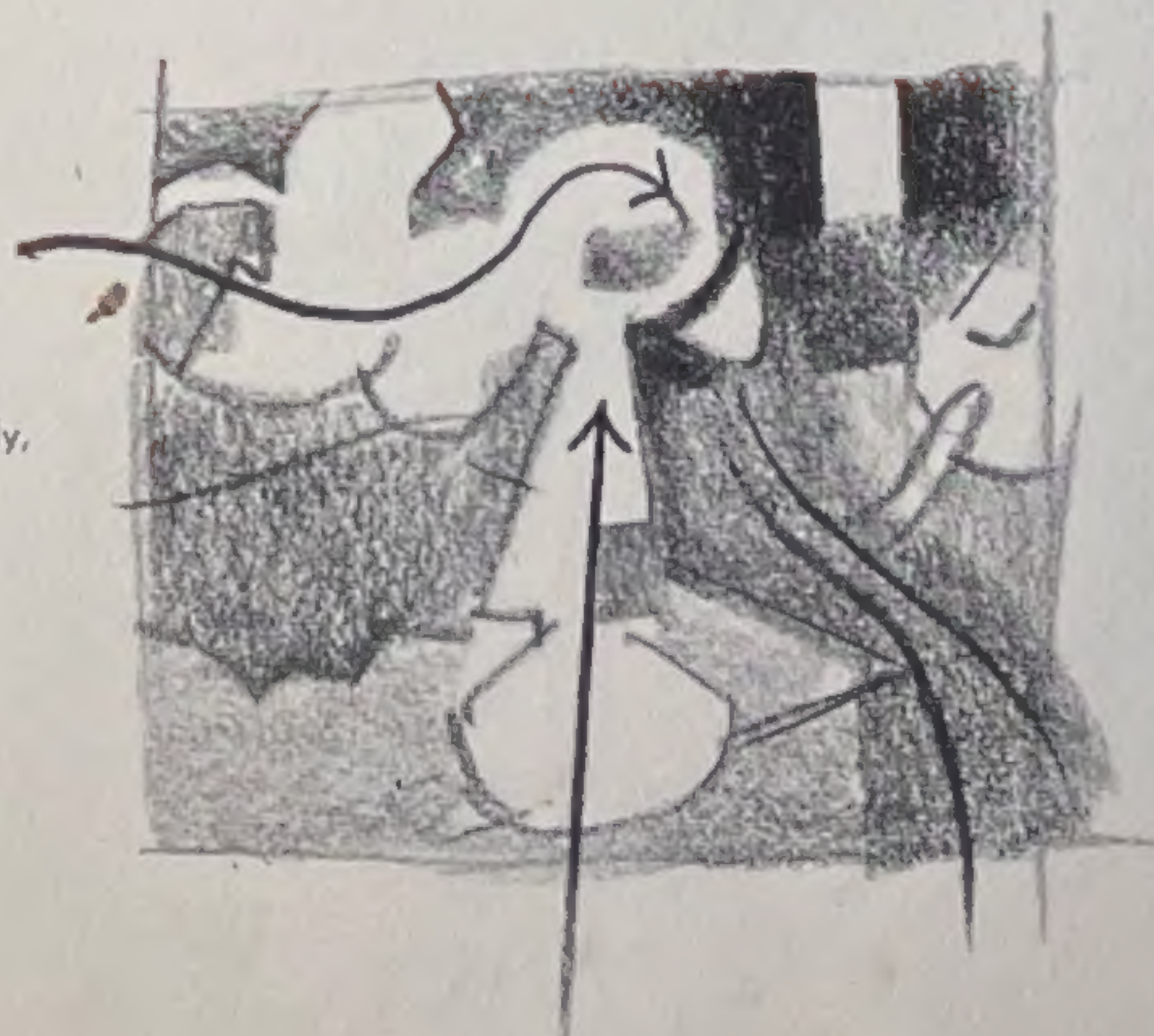
Julian Levi

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EDGAR DEGAS
The Millinery Shop
Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago

This magnificent picture, done by a master of compositional techniques, is extremely subtle in its organization. Basically, oval shapes are played against triangles, diagonals against verticals, lights against darks. The forms are arranged in patterns of the greatest beauty. The accompanying diagram suggests some of these relationships. Study the painting itself carefully, and notice how similar shapes are varied just slightly to add interest. Notice how lines and planes roughly parallel each other, as in the near side of the table, the near arm of the woman, the line of her shoulders, the arrangement of the two hats just above, the far line of the table, and the line between wall and floor. Check the vertical accents in the same way. After you have studied this section, look at this picture again and see how many more compositional devices you can discover.



Composition

Composition means selecting appropriate elements and arranging them within the picture space so they communicate your idea and your feelings effectively to the viewer. It makes a great deal of difference which elements you select and how you put them together within your picture space. Often, a picture will be strong and interesting or weak and confused, depending on how it is composed.

Composition, in a basic sense, means combining forms and space to produce a harmonious whole as well as a meaningful statement. When you make a picture, you arrange your elements much the way a composer of music arranges musical notes and themes to form a harmonious result. The composer of music creates an arrangement in sound — you, as an artist, create a visual arrangement. In composing a picture you are chiefly interested in where you place your objects in the picture space, how important you make them in size and value, and how they relate to each other and to the borders of the picture.

Good pictures, you see, do not simply happen. They are not the result of thoughtlessly throwing together miscellaneous objects or filling up a background with details. No matter how well you draw or paint, unless you plan your picture carefully, it is likely to leave the viewer with an unsatisfied feeling. A well-composed picture, on the other hand, will give the viewer a satisfied sense of order or beauty, although he may not realize by what methods this satisfaction was produced.

Expressing your point of view

Naturally, each of us will have his own approach to a given subject. One painter may want to portray his subject romantically. Another may choose to present it in a matter-of-fact or realistic way. A third may be interested in emphasizing the textures or forms. Every point of view is valid — and every artist will compose the same subject somewhat differently, to bring out his point of view. Composition gives you the tools that enable you to say what you want to say. They are a means to an end, to be used in your own way — not a hard-and-fast set of rules that must be followed blindly.

In composing, you may emphasize those elements that are most important to your point of view and your picture idea. Often this requires a change in the sizes of things. You make important forms larger or clearer or stronger than they may appear in reality, and less important forms smaller or less distinct.

Forms can be featured or played down by adjusting their position as well as their size. For instance, you might place a powerful, important figure close to the middle of your picture space and draw him large, so he would dominate the picture. By contrast, a shy, retiring character might be shown much smaller and to the side, dominated by the space and the forms around him.

The artist can actually control which part of his picture the viewer will linger over and find most meaningful. By the way he arranges the forms, he can establish a definite focal point or center of interest, and lead the eye to it indirectly or directly.

He can also use light and dark tones to help emphasize this center of interest.

Often the artist can use the natural shape of his subject to good effect in establishing his composition and the proportions of his picture. For example, if the subject is a wide expanse of meadow or sea, it might well suggest a picture of a long, horizontal shape. For a picture of a long, narrow subject like a tall man or a church tower, a vertical picture of similar proportions might dramatize the height of the subject most strikingly. Different forms are often best expressed by different picture shapes.

The picture starts in your mind

Before making a picture, the artist must decide what he wants to paint in it. He has to select his subject matter, and then he has to compose it so that the picture will be as effective as possible. But, to start with, he needs an idea.

Ideas begin in the mind, and that is precisely where pictures begin, too. In fact, the mind or imagination is a natural creator of pictures. When you hear a word or think of an idea, the imagination goes to work at once. Drawing upon things stored up in the memory, it projects a picture in the mind.

Suppose, for example, you hear the word "Tahiti." Of course this word will evoke different images for different people. For one person, it will call up a mental image of a tropical landscape, with tall palm trees and brilliantly colored flowers. For a second person, it may suggest handsome brown-skinned Tahitians walking through the jungle. For a third, it may evoke an image of palm trees bending their heads under the furious impact of a typhoon.

We are always forming such mental images of things which we hear, read, or think about. These images are the raw material of which pictures are made.

The first mental image which your mind forms in response to a picture idea is just one possibility. As you think about it, other and better views may occur to you. You must try out these variations before deciding which will make the best picture. It will help you, in thinking out your idea, to ask yourself: "What kind of mood do I want to create? What emotions do I want to evoke? What things should I include in the picture so the viewer will grasp my idea at once? What things will confuse or distract him — and should therefore be eliminated? Is this the best arrangement possible?"

The artist thinks on paper. As one image follows another through the mind, you should put them down on paper in the form of rough sketches, working out the arrangement of the objects which you see in your imagination. Your thinking should be flexible at this point; let your mind roam, and explore all the possibilities. Make many sketches, and keep them broad and simple. This is not the time to bother with details!

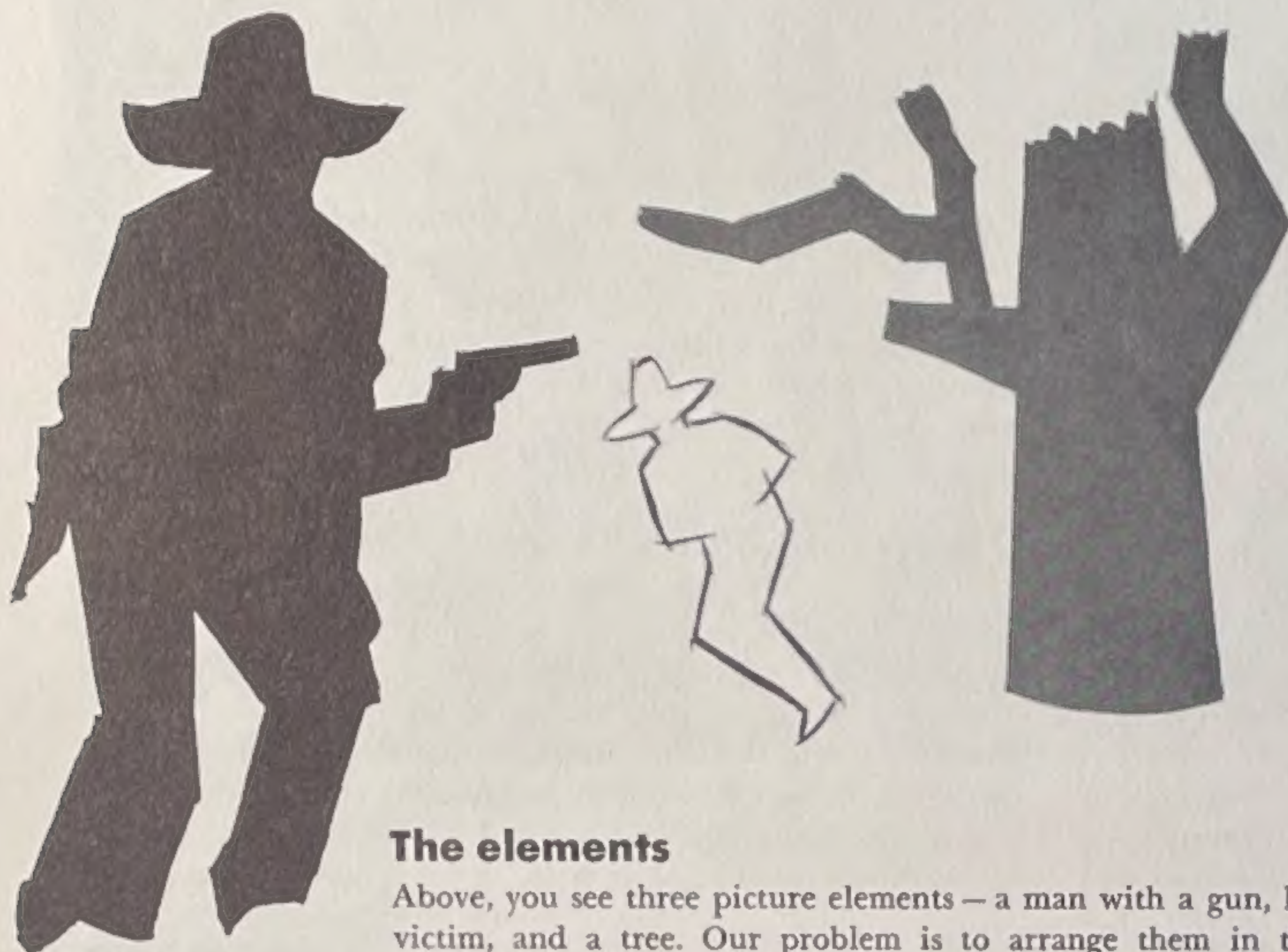
On the following pages we show you how to apply the principles of composition to your mental image and develop it into a picture that expresses your idea clearly and strongly.

Basic thinking and arranging

When you have a good mental image of what you want to show in your picture, the picture is already partly composed. The next step is to arrange the objects as effectively as you can.

Here we show you the kind of basic thinking you must do in composing. Start by simplifying the objects in your picture. In

your preliminary sketches, reduce these objects to their simplest shapes. You need to try them out in different arrangements to find the one you like best, and this will be easiest if you ignore the details and concentrate on the big forms. These large forms must be properly related if the picture is to be successful.



The elements

Above, you see three picture elements — a man with a gun, his victim, and a tree. Our problem is to arrange them in the picture space at the right to form a good composition.



Placing the elements

Notice, first of all, how utterly simple the picture elements have been made. They are completely bare of detail. It is almost as if we decided on the general size, shape, and value of the picture elements and the background and cut them out of pieces of black, white, and gray paper. Our composition problem is mainly a matter of shifting them around until we arrive at the best arrangement. Naturally, we will work with a pencil — our “thinking tool” — and try out each arrangement of the picture elements in a rough sketch.



First, we try it this way. The figure of the gunman gives us a good dominant form up front but crowds the rest of the picture.



This arrangement doesn't work out because there is no dominant shape. Gunman, tree, and background figure all compete.



This time we try overlapping the foreground figure and the tree, but the tree looks too important and confuses the action.



Here is a good solution — it will do very well for our final composition. The action is clear and the shapes are well related.



EDOUARD MANET

Portrait of Baudelaire's Mistress
Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

The four main elements of composition

To make your study of composition as simple as possible we have divided the subject into four basic elements for you to consider — area, depth, line, and value. Here we show you what these elements mean and how Edouard Manet used them to compose a picture. At the start you will probably apply each of these principles very consciously. As you gain experience, however, you will be able to compose your pictures the way your Faculty members do, instinctively thinking of area, depth, line, and value all at the same time.



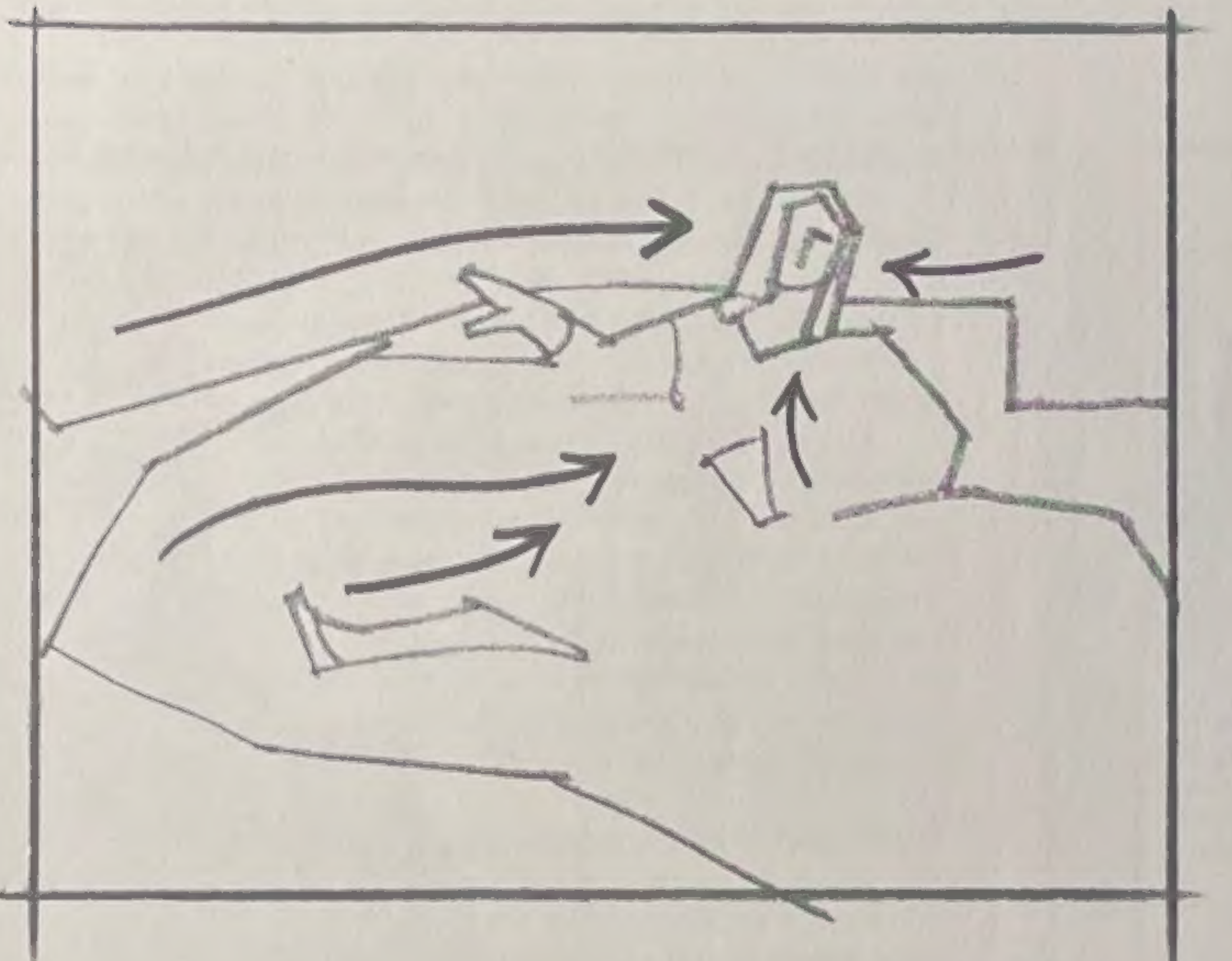
Picture area

Picture area is the flat surface within the four borders of your picture — the surface on which you draw and paint. When you work in terms of picture area your chief concerns are how big you make your objects and where you place them. In this painting the figure of the woman in her splendid gown claims our attention at once because Manet made her the largest form in the picture and placed her in a prominent position. She dominates the picture area; everything else is secondary.



Depth

Depth is the illusion of distance or a third dimension. By drawing things in depth you make them seem to exist in three-dimensional space and to appear close to the viewer or far away. In this picture the strong sense of depth is created by the form of the skirt, which billows from the foreground back to the torso of the woman. Also the placement of the foot in relation to the rest of her body enhances the illusion that her torso is further back.



Line

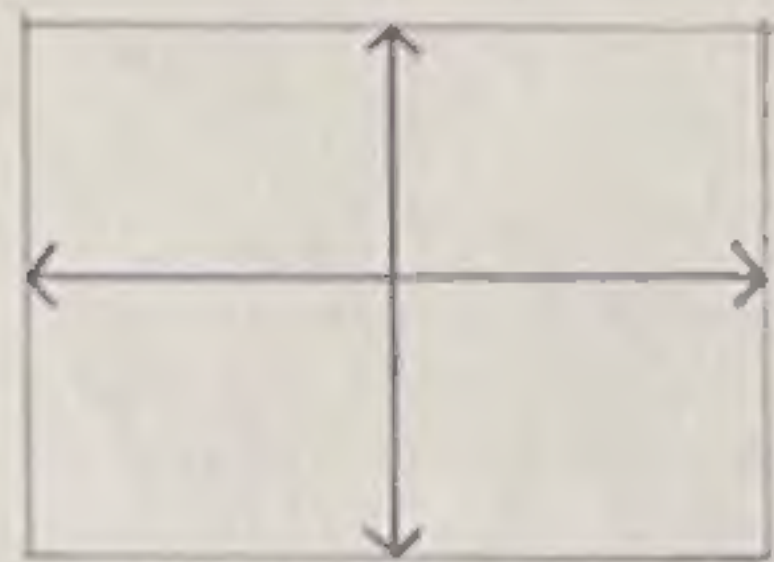
Line, as we use the word in this section, means the line of direction our eye follows in looking at a picture. In composing with line you arrange your objects or forms so their shapes or main lines lead the eye to the center of interest. Here the center of interest is the head and shoulders of the woman. The sweep of the back of the couch and the edges and lines of the gown all carry our eye to the woman's head.



Value

Value is (1) the lightness or darkness of a particular area or shape within the picture, or (2) the over-all quality of lightness or darkness of the whole picture. The diagram shows us how the artist used value to further emphasize his center of interest. Notice that he chose a light gown for the woman and set her against the dark background of the sofa. The sofa, in turn, was placed against the light drape. Manet carefully posed the subject so her black hair would stand out from the drape. This painting is a perfect example of how the use of value pattern can strongly focus the viewer's attention on the part of the picture that the artist wishes to feature.

Picture area



The artist's first consideration in composing a picture is the picture area. This is simply the flat surface on which you draw or paint within the borders of your picture.

If you have ever taken a snapshot you have already worked with picture area. To take your photograph, you looked in the viewer of the camera and moved back to be certain your whole subject was in the picture — or else you moved closer so the subject would appear larger and clearer. These simple steps in controlling the space in a photograph are basically the same ones you use to control picture area in drawing or painting.

To use your picture area most effectively, you must weigh carefully where you place things within it and what size you make them. Your choice of size and placement should never be accidental or arbitrary. After you have placed an object in your composition, pause and study the size and location you have given it. Ask yourself: "Does this create the effect I had in mind?" If not, try making things larger or smaller. Move them to different places within the four borders until you are satisfied with the result.



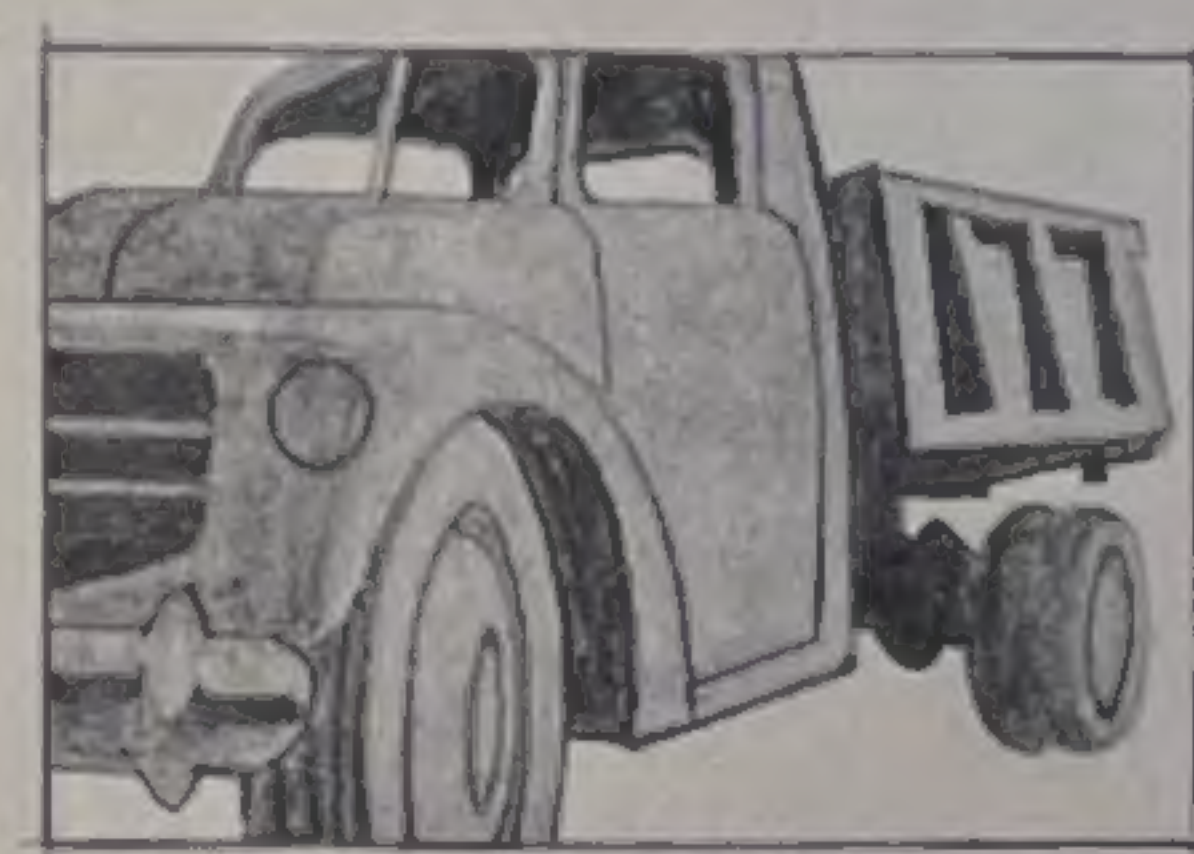
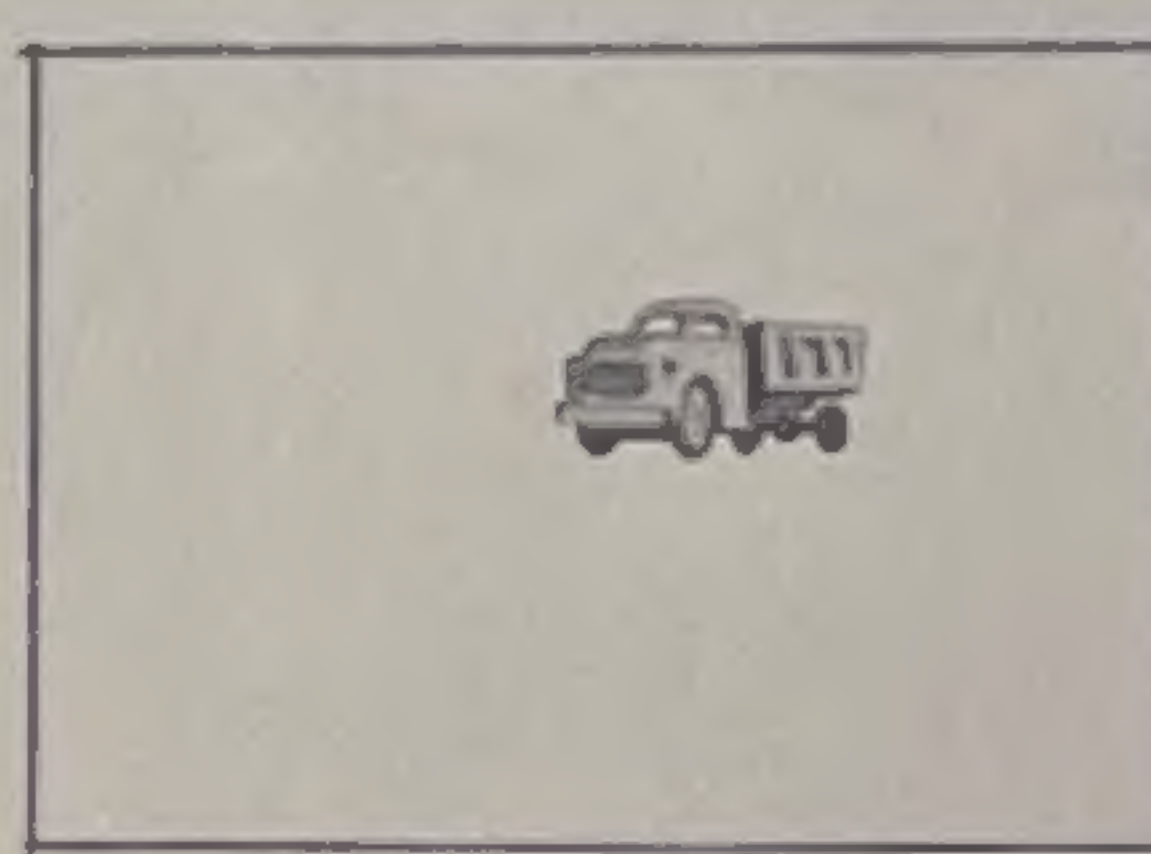
At the left is the figure of a man. We shall try this figure in different sizes and locations in the picture area to see what happens. Drawn as above, the man dominates.



If the figure is drawn very small, the whole effect of the picture changes tremendously. Now the man seems isolated and far away — overpowered by the space around him.



Exactly the opposite effect occurs when the figure fills a large part of the picture area. Now he overwhelms the space. This is appropriate for a close-up, intimate view.



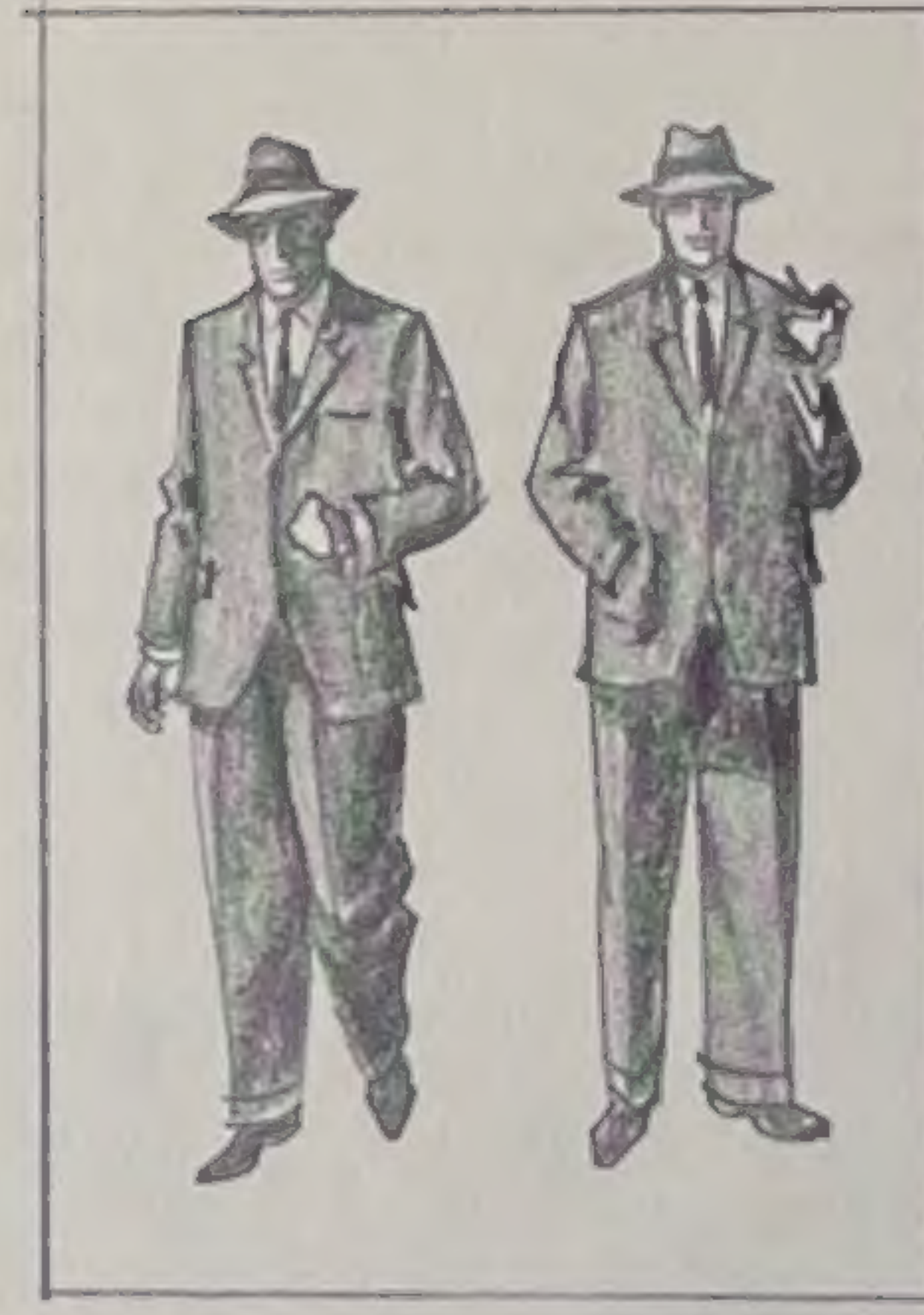
No matter what our subject, the same principle applies. For example, we can make a small child appear to overpower the picture space — or a huge truck seem isolated and remote. The point is to choose a size appropriate for the effect we want.



The effect that one object or figure completely overwhelms another can be created by sharp contrasts in size, as in this composition.



It is not necessary to have great disparity in size for one figure to claim our attention over the other. Here the nearer figure dominates.



Here neither figure is dominant. This is all right if you want both figures the same size — but normally it would be considered monotonous.

Vary your sizes with a purpose

When we show just a single thing in a picture, the viewer's eye cannot help but be drawn to it. No matter how small we make this single object, it is the center of interest — the most important thing in the picture. However, when we add a second object, a third, or still more, the situation becomes more complicated. Unless we establish a scale of relative importance among these things, the viewer's eye will not know where to go, and he may not understand the message the picture is supposed to convey.

Again, one of the artist's ways of showing what is important in his picture is through the relative sizes he makes his objects.

If, for example, we want to compose two figures in a picture, we can make one figure overwhelm the other or dominate it just slightly — depending, to a good extent, on the relative size we make each figure. If we want the viewer's interest to be divided equally between the two figures, we can make them both the same size. It is possible to place strong emphasis on a figure by drawing it in the foreground and making any other figure much smaller. The same rules apply when we have many figures or objects in a picture.

These, admittedly, are very simple examples. The possibilities are endless. However, the basic principle remains the same: The size we give to things and where we place them control their importance in the picture. Size should never be chosen haphazardly or without regard to the effect it will produce. It should be decided upon just as carefully as the action or pose.



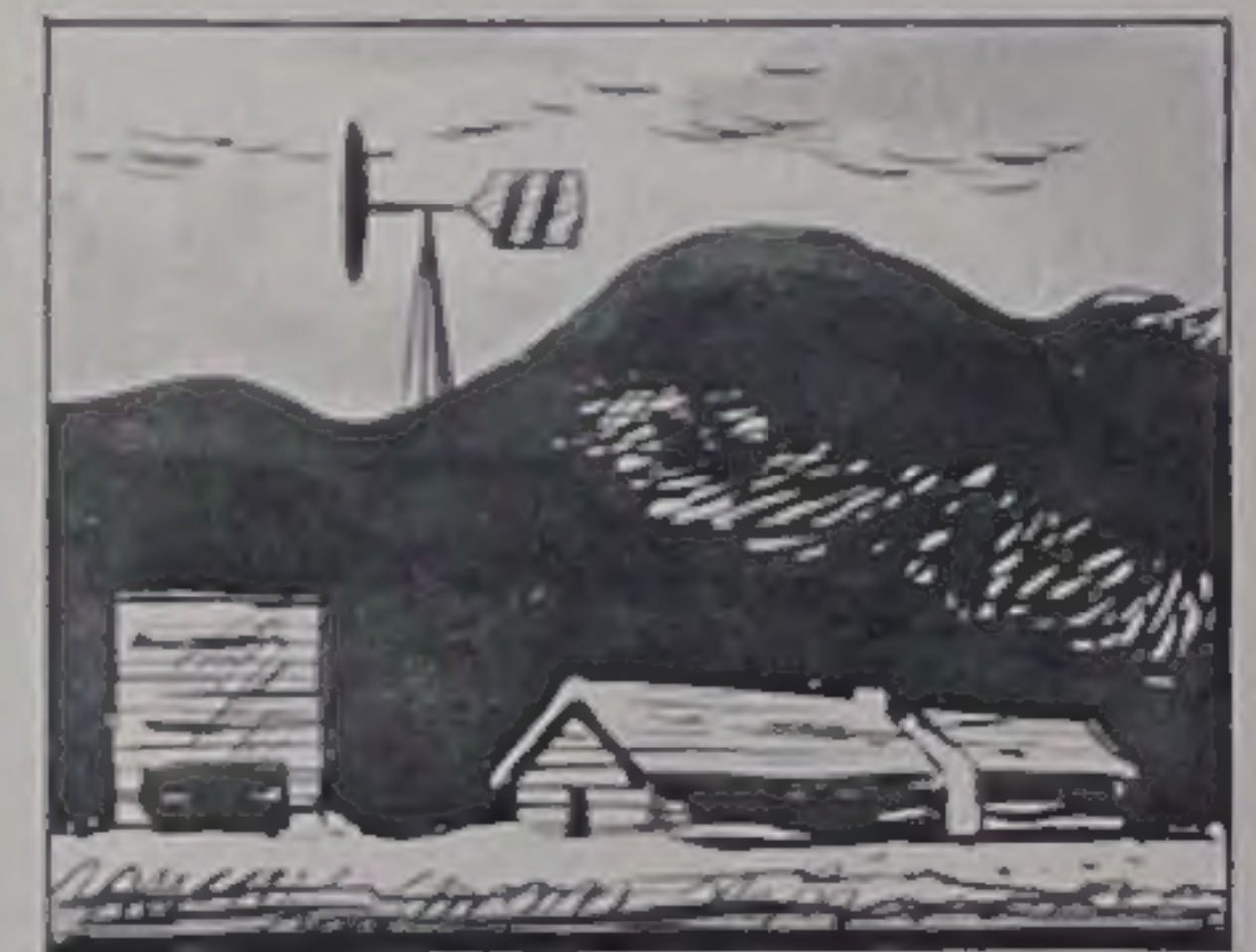
Whenever possible, select objects of varying size for your picture (left). This variety creates interest. Objects that are alike in size will tend to appear monotonous even though they are different kinds of things (right).

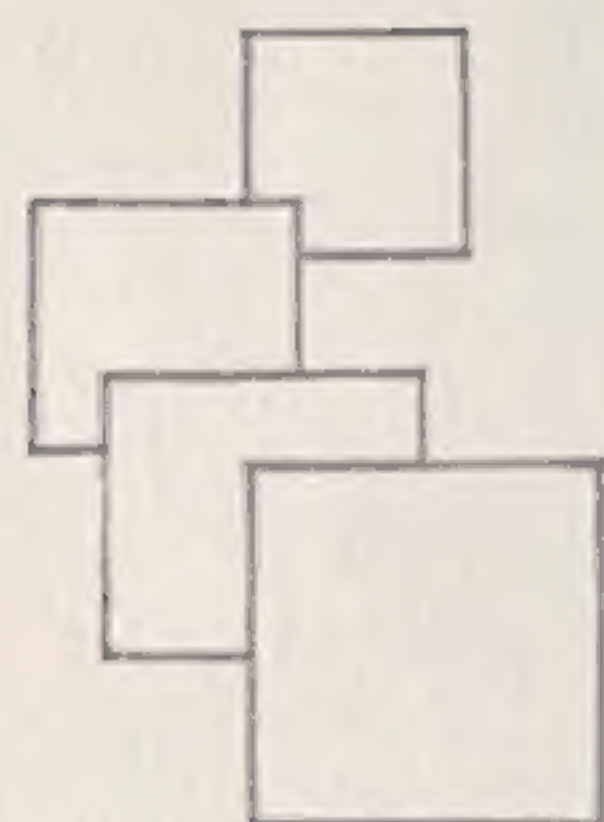


In the picture at the left the sense of distance and the dominance of space is easily felt. By drawing the figures larger (right) we make them dominate the picture area.



Figures or mountains — the effect is the same. In the view of the mountain at the left, we immediately feel the dominance of the sky. But if our mountain takes up most of the picture space (right) we get the feeling of its huge, overwhelming bulk.



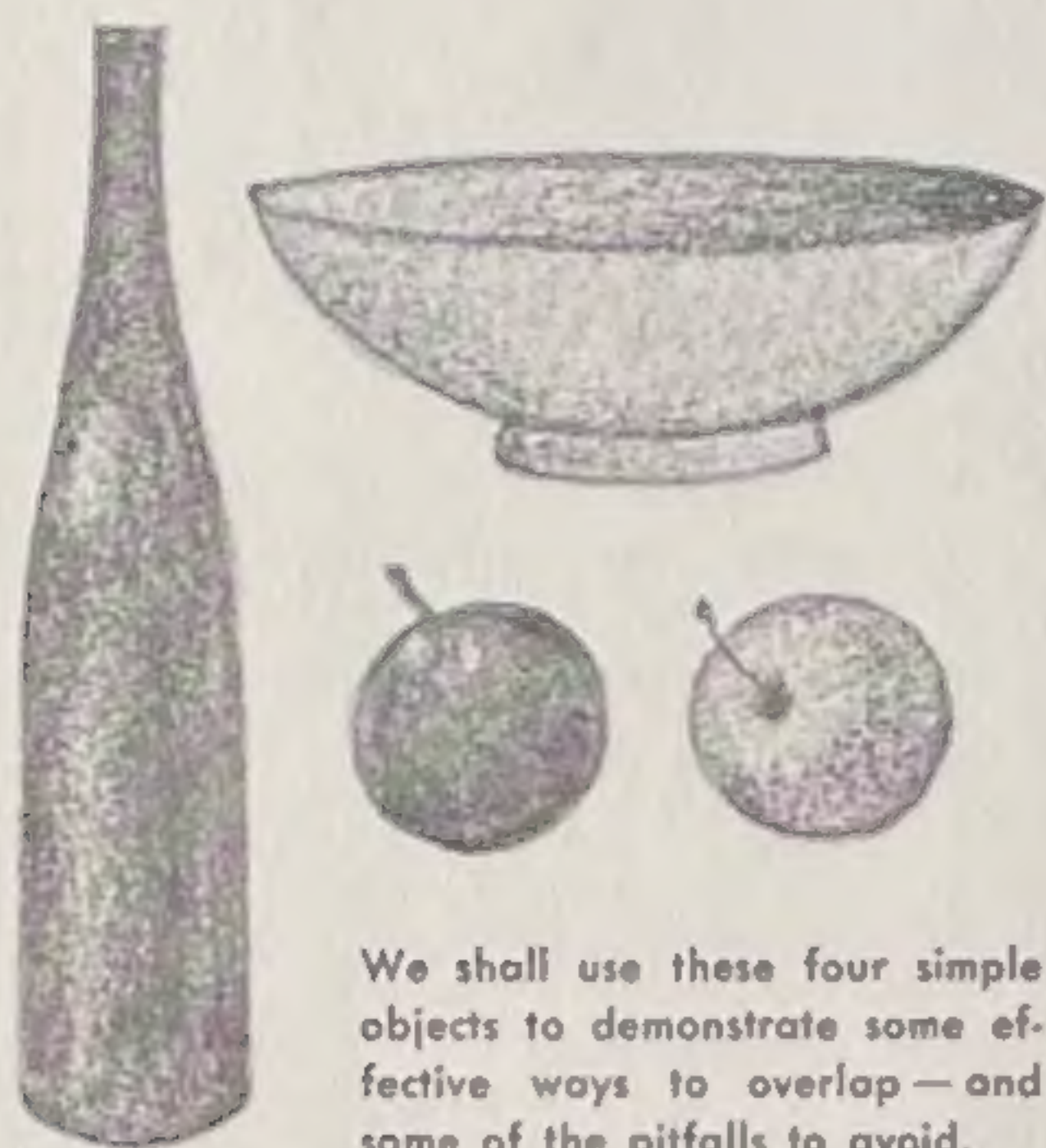


Overlapping

Most of the pictures we make have more than one object in them, and each often differs from the others in size and shape. Overlapping provides a good way to organize these varied objects into interesting, unified arrangements.

When we overlap things in a picture, we are applying a prin-

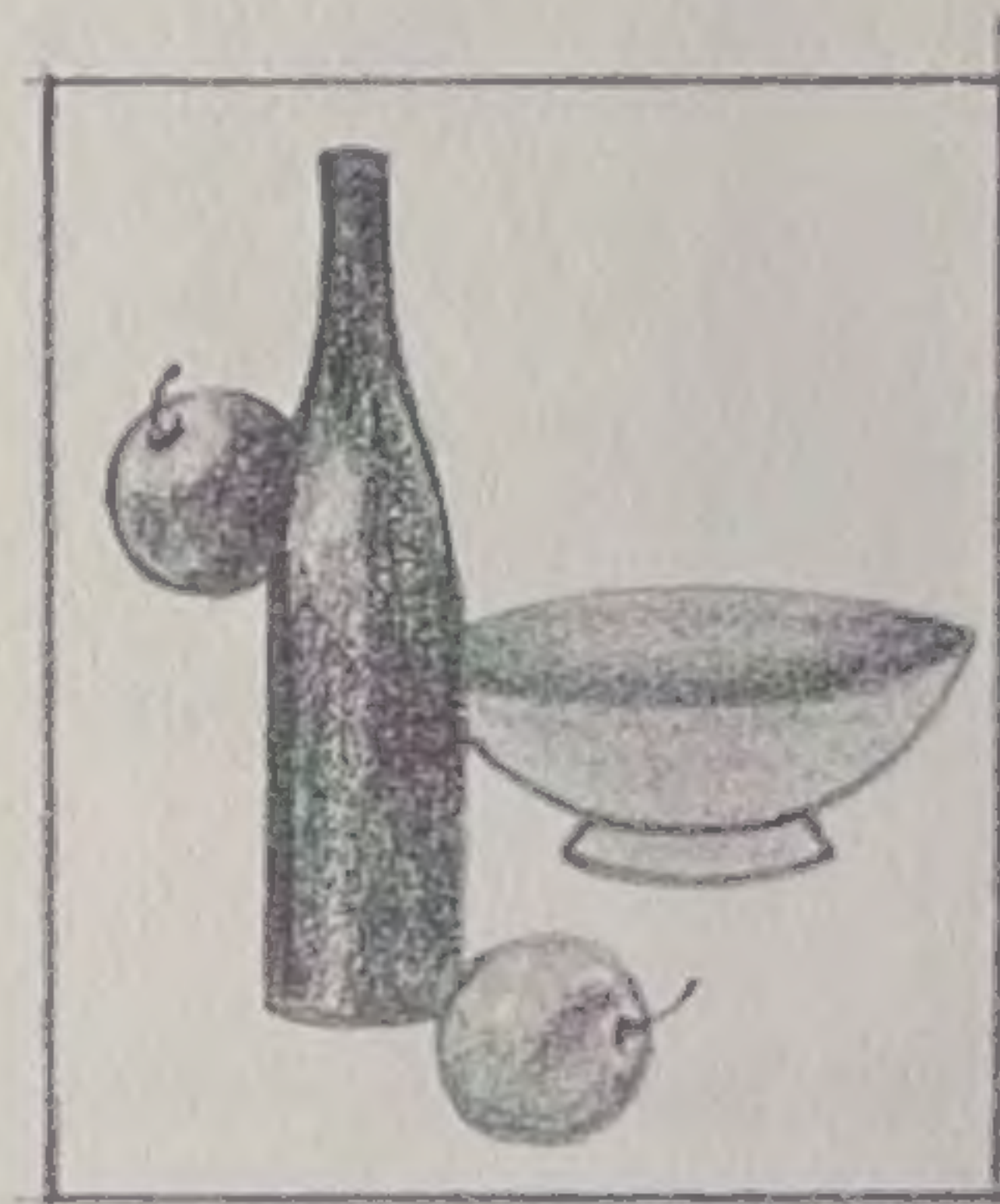
ciple we observe at work in everyday life. Most of the things we see are partly hidden or overlapped by other objects. Overlapping, however, can also help us to express our picture idea more directly. By partly concealing the secondary objects through overlapping, we can make the important ones more prominent.



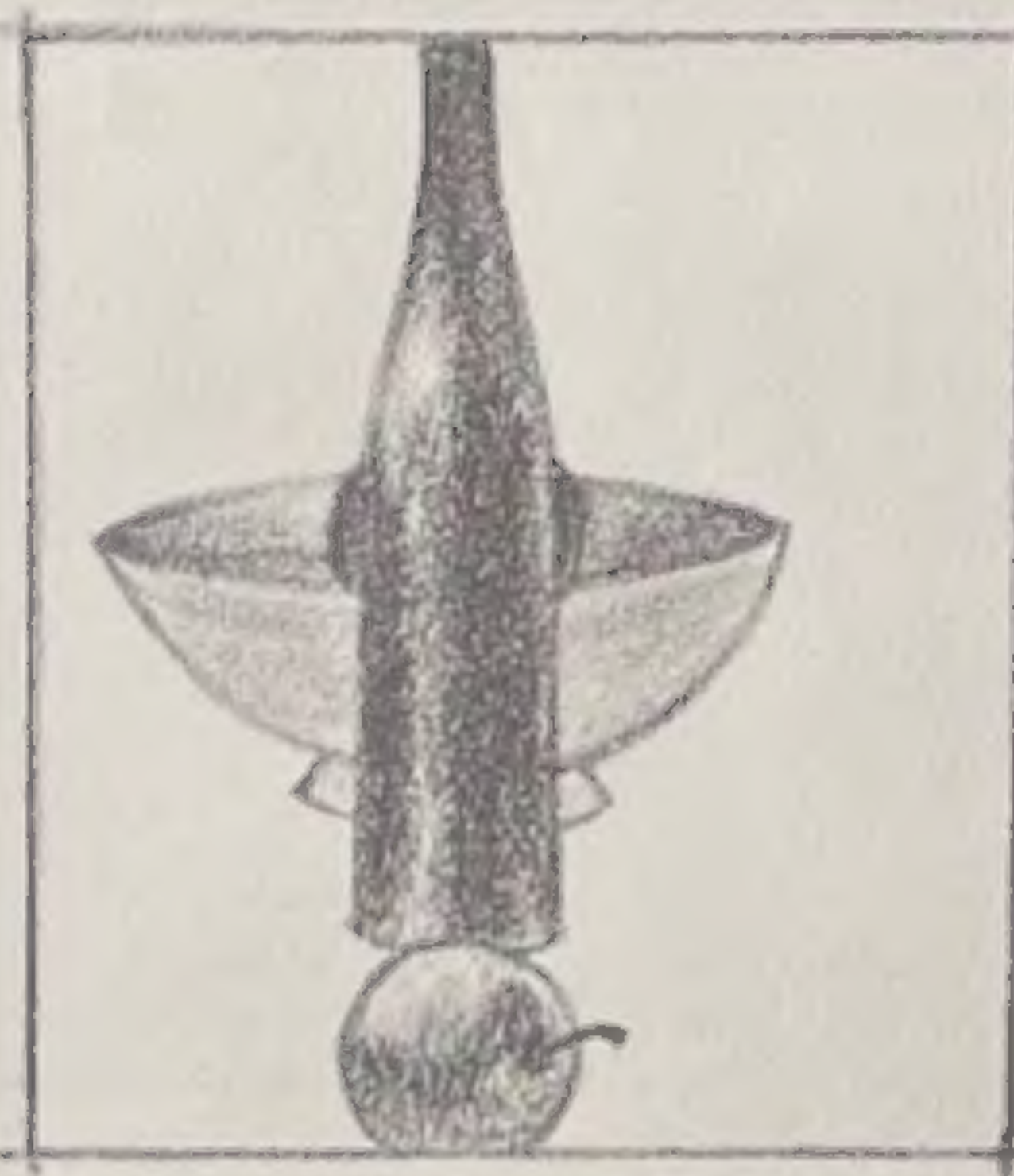
We shall use these four simple objects to demonstrate some effective ways to overlap—and some of the pitfalls to avoid.



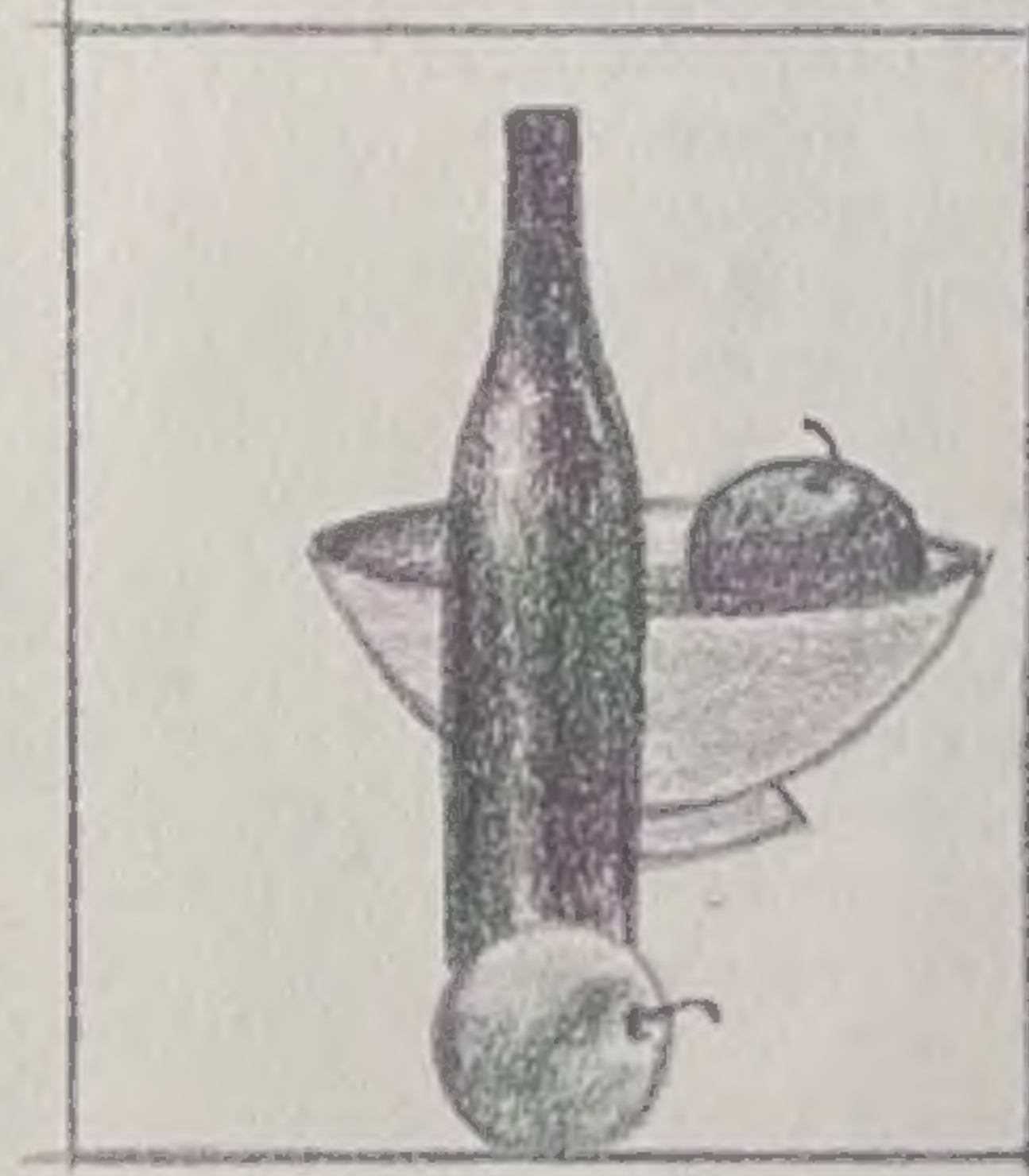
Here is a natural tendency many students have at first: they show all of each object. Isolated objects do not make a well-organized picture.



This picture has a little more unity—but the objects touch each other rather than overlap. Overlapping should be more decisive.



Poor overlapping—the objects are lined up right behind each other. The apple in the bowl is lost, and the bottle seems to rest on the foreground apple.



Moving the bowl to the right helps—we can see the apple in it now. But the bottle is lined up too directly behind the foreground apple.



Now the composition works well. We have moved the bottle and bowl to the left, the apple to the right. Everything doesn't have to overlap.

Cropping

Even the border may be used to overlap objects. This is commonly called "cropping." The border may be used to crop a large part of the object—as long as the part which shows is typical enough to identify the object.



When we show all of each object in a picture the effect tends to be dull and uninteresting. This picture would be better if the objects were rearranged as at right.



The shapes here are the same as those in the picture at left—but the effect is more interesting because the objects are varied in size and overlapped. The tree, cropped by the border, serves as a "lead in."



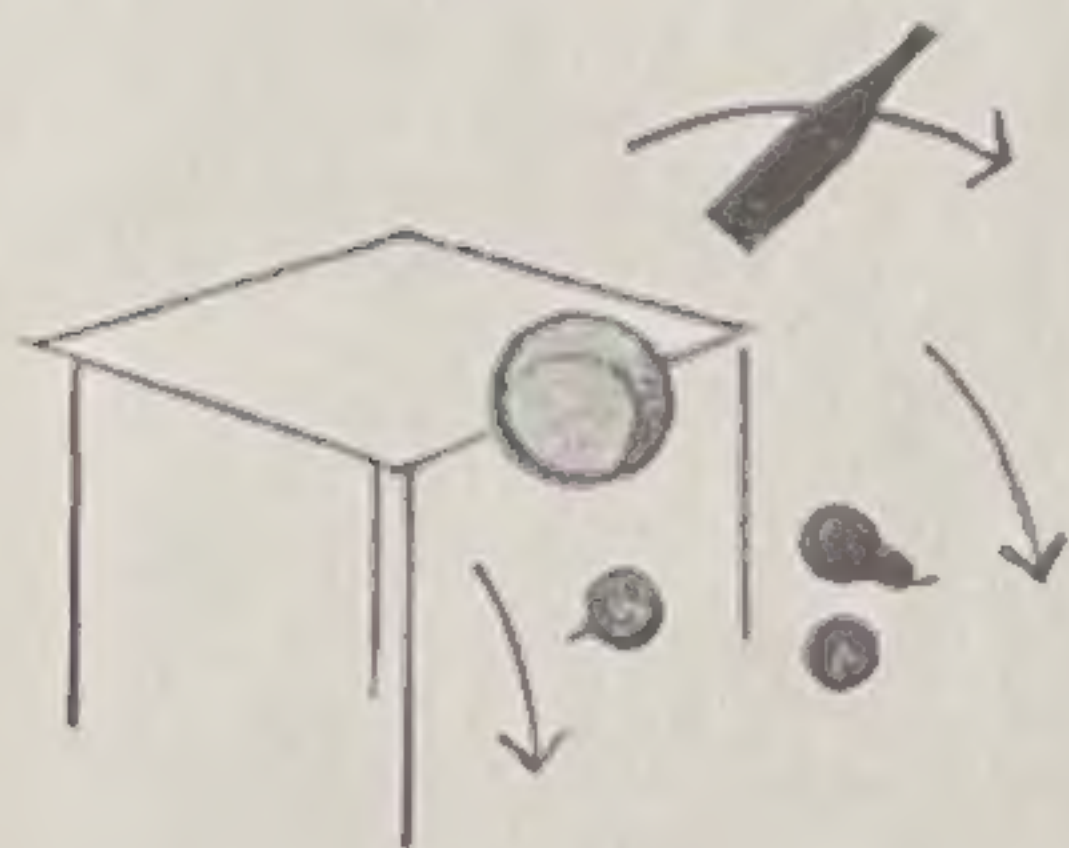
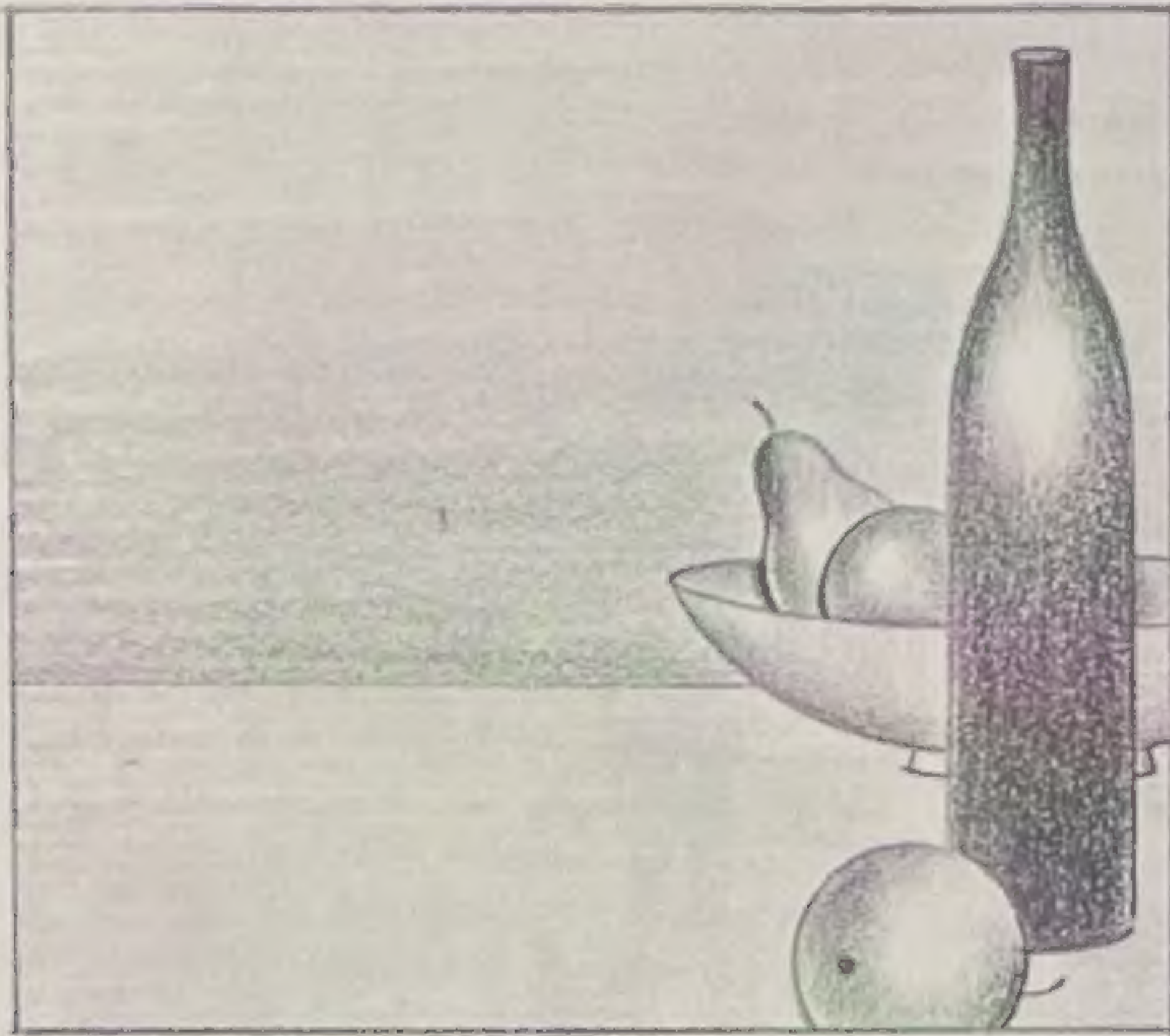
When all the objects are drawn entirely within the frame lines (*left*) the picture may appear formal or monotonous. But when parts of the objects extend beyond the frame lines or behind one another, we have variety.

Applying common sense to composition

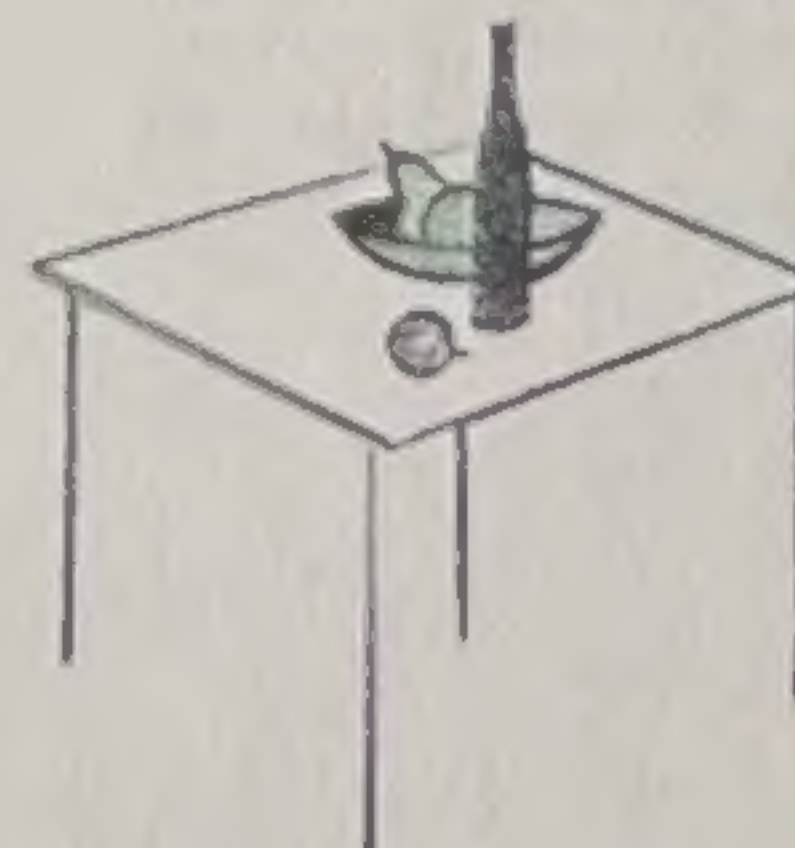
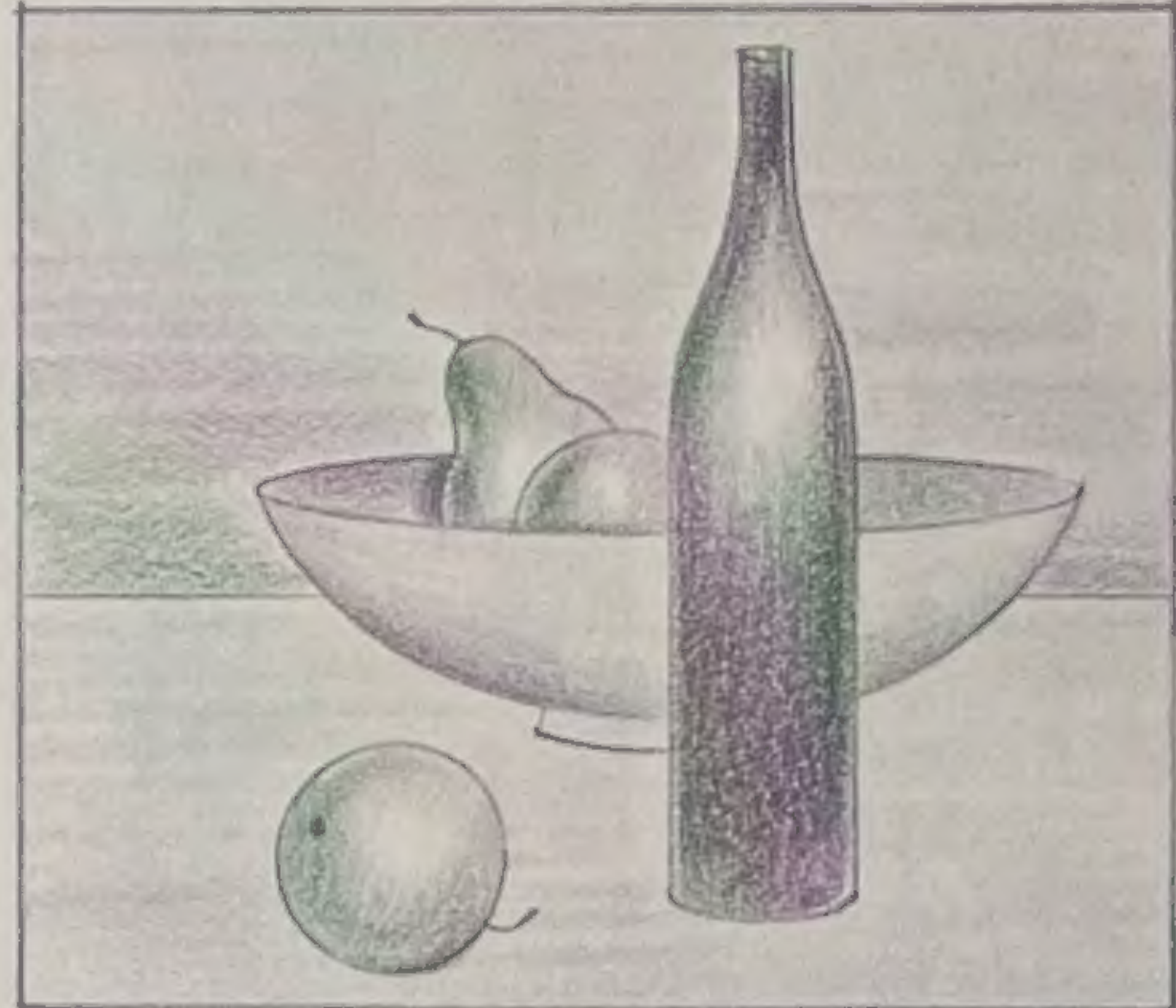
Although the actual making of pictures may be new to you, you will find that you have a good deal of practical experience and judgment which you can apply in composing them. The same rules of common sense hold true for pictures as for real life. For example, a picture, like a room, may be bare and empty, or crowded and cluttered, or have too much in one corner — and,

under ordinary conditions, none of these extremes is good.

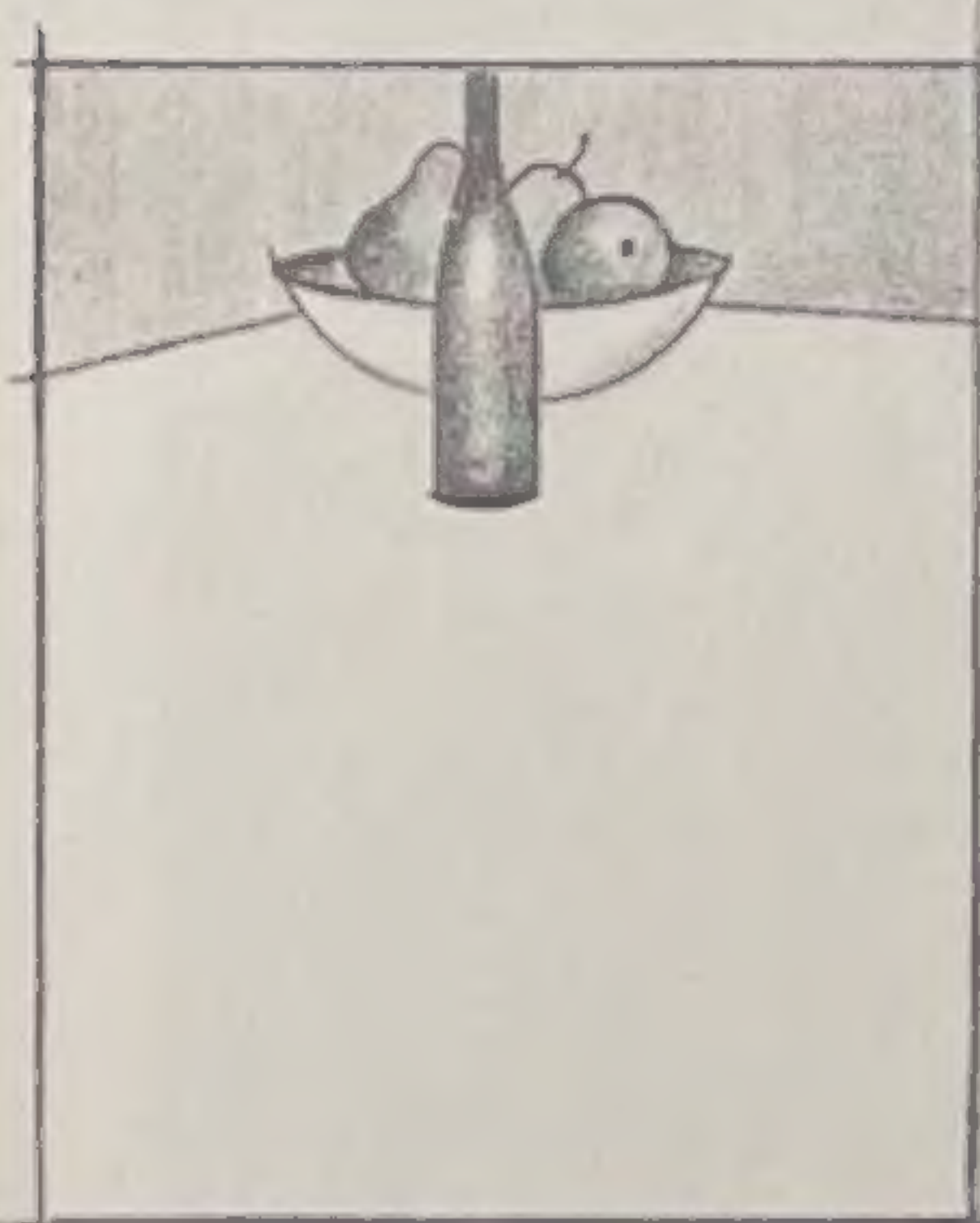
Below are examples which will help you tie in your thinking about picture making with your everyday experience. They demonstrate that there is nothing mysterious about composing a picture. It calls for the same kind of common sense and judgment you use in solving the ordinary problems of daily living.



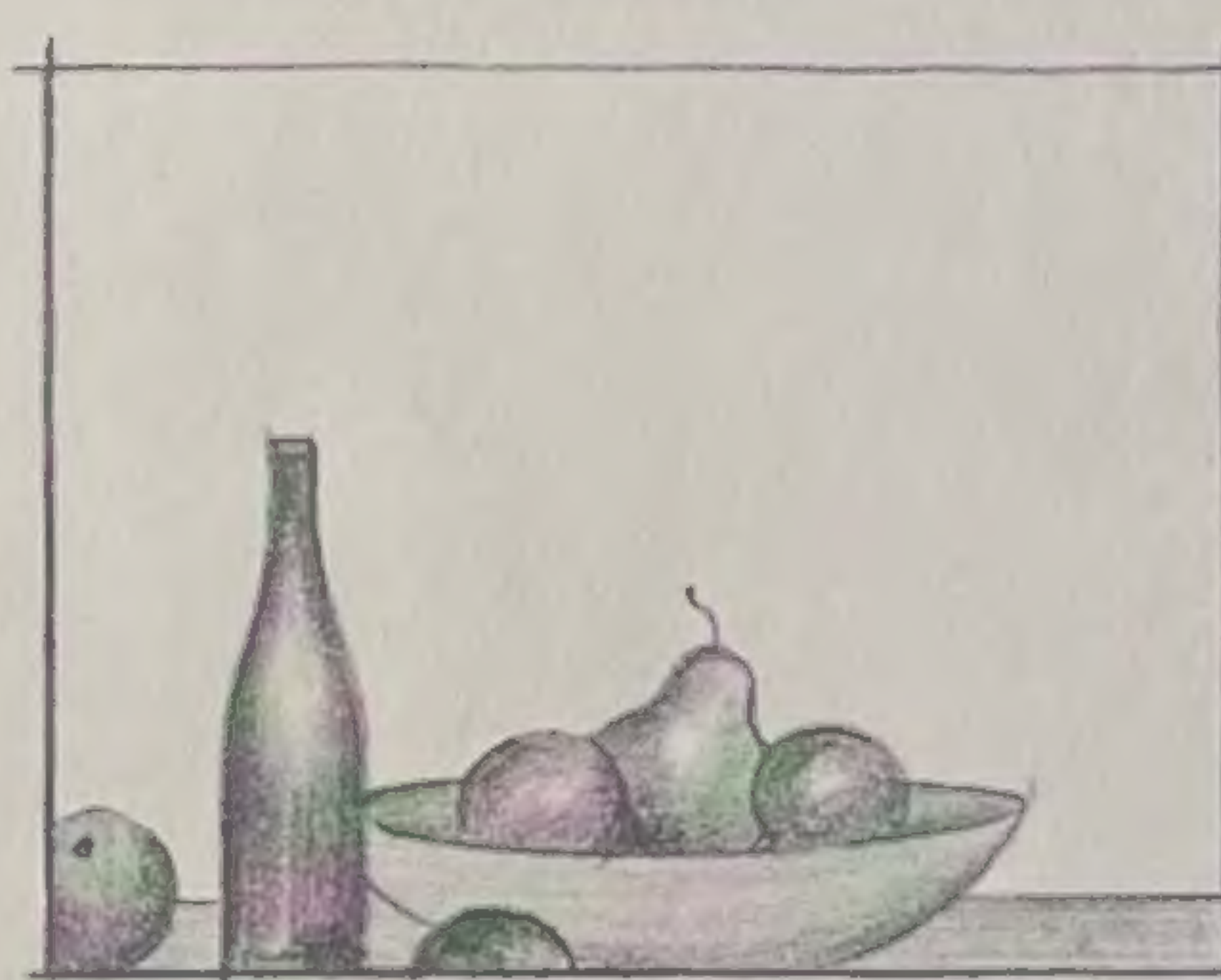
Let's apply a common-sense approach to picture making in this arrangement of some fruit, a bowl and a bottle. This composition does not make sense. Why crowd everything against the right border — and waste two thirds of our picture area? It's like setting objects on the very edge of a table. We get the uncomfortable feeling that they are in danger of falling off.



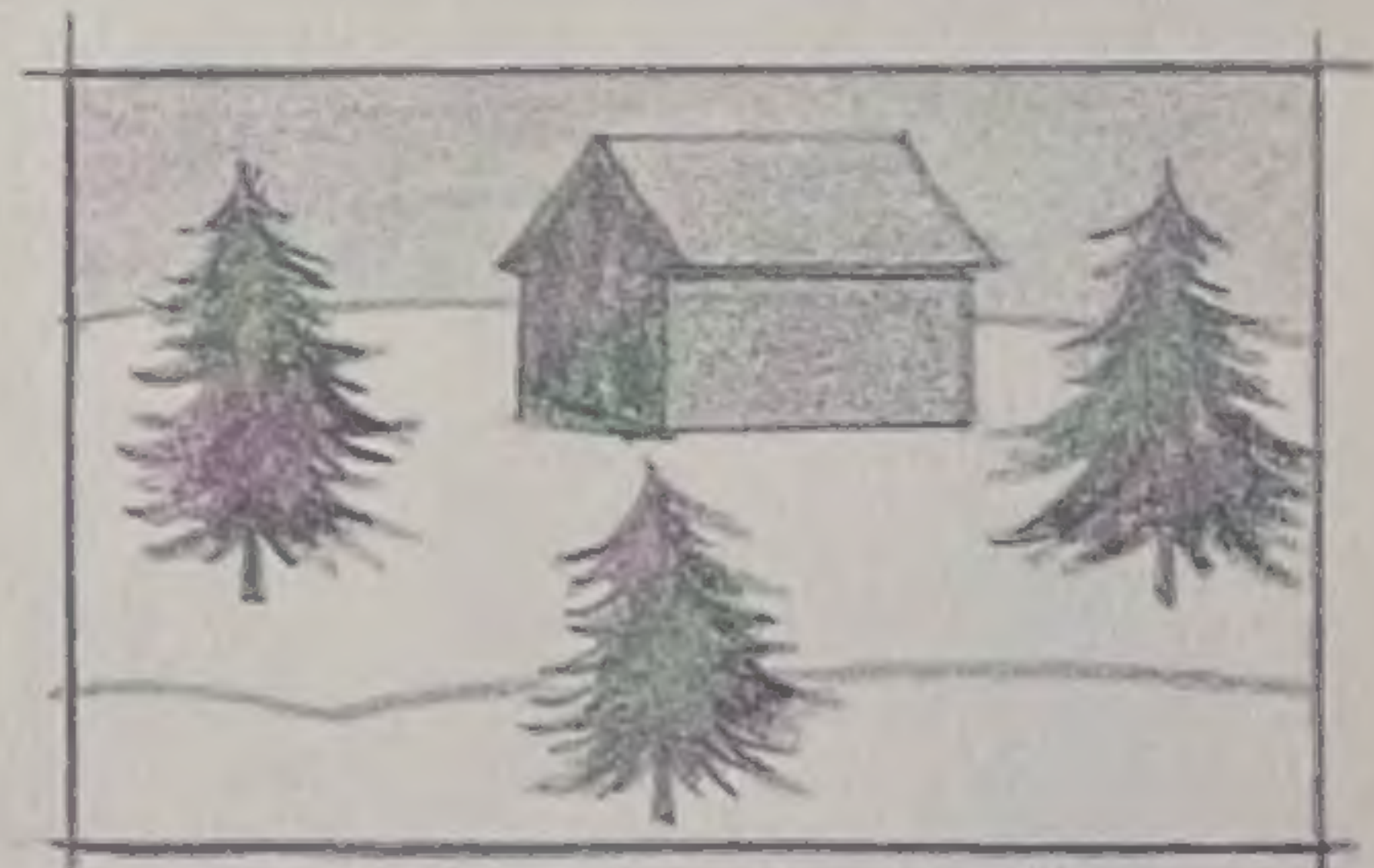
This arrangement makes sense because it makes more logical use of the whole picture area. The objects rest comfortably within the picture space. Nothing seems to be falling out of the composition as in the first picture. Both bottle and bowl are placed off center, to avoid splitting the picture in half. The left side of the picture area is no longer empty and wasted.



Topheavy: Everything is needlessly crowded against the top border, wasting most of the picture space.



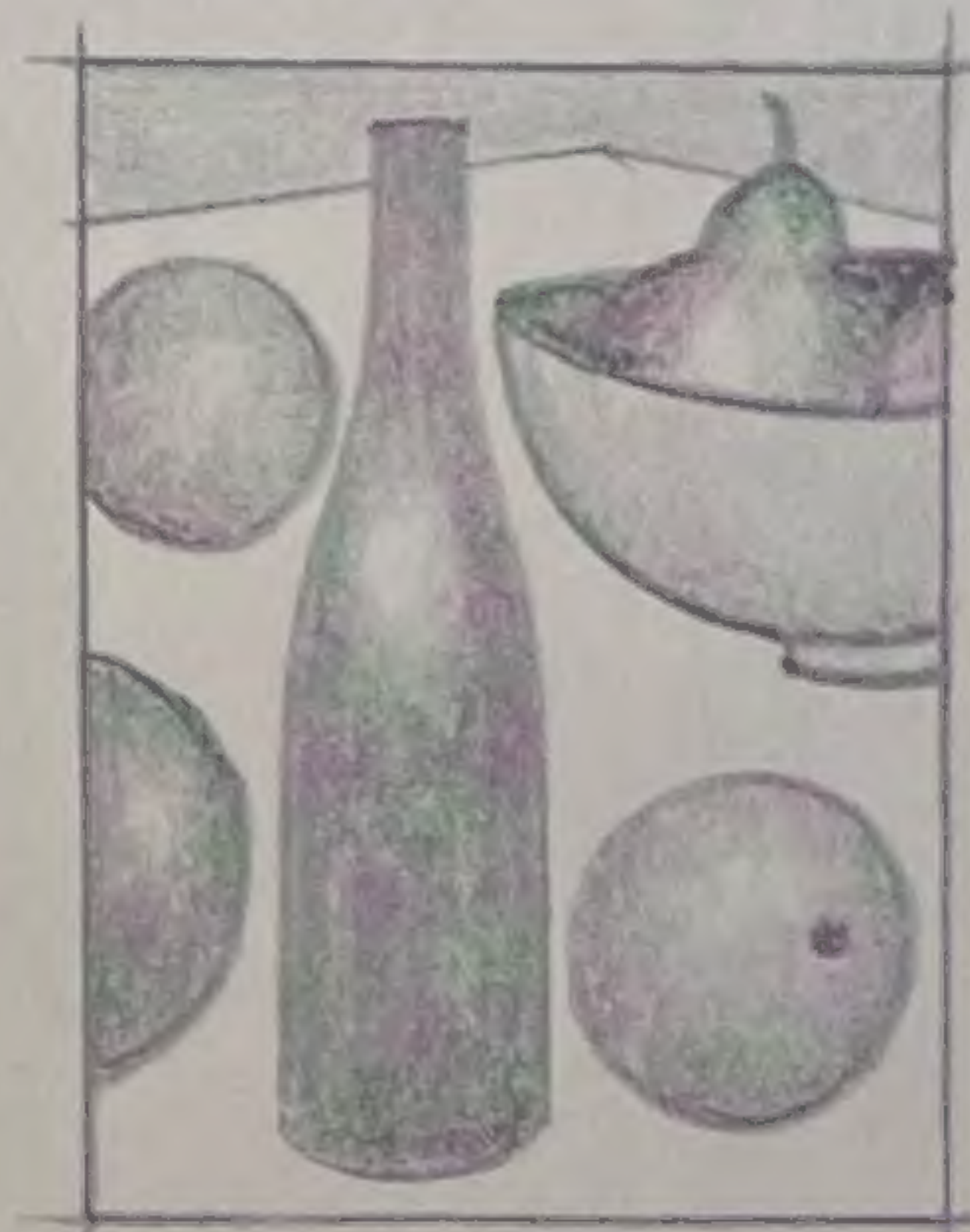
Bottom heavy: This arrangement is the reverse of the left one. Everything is jammed against the bottom border and the rest of the picture area is unused.



Everything competes for attention: All the objects here are equally important, and our eye jumps back and forth from one to the other without any center of interest on which to rest. All right for a wallpaper, but not for a picture.



Shapes should be clear: (Left) It is difficult to see the man because his form merges with that of the tree against which he is leaning. (Right) It makes better sense to show the identifying shape of the man standing out against the contrasting light background. Here his form and action are perfectly clear.



Crowded: The objects in this illustration are too large for the picture area. They almost bump against each other, creating an obvious effect of overcrowding.

Points to remember

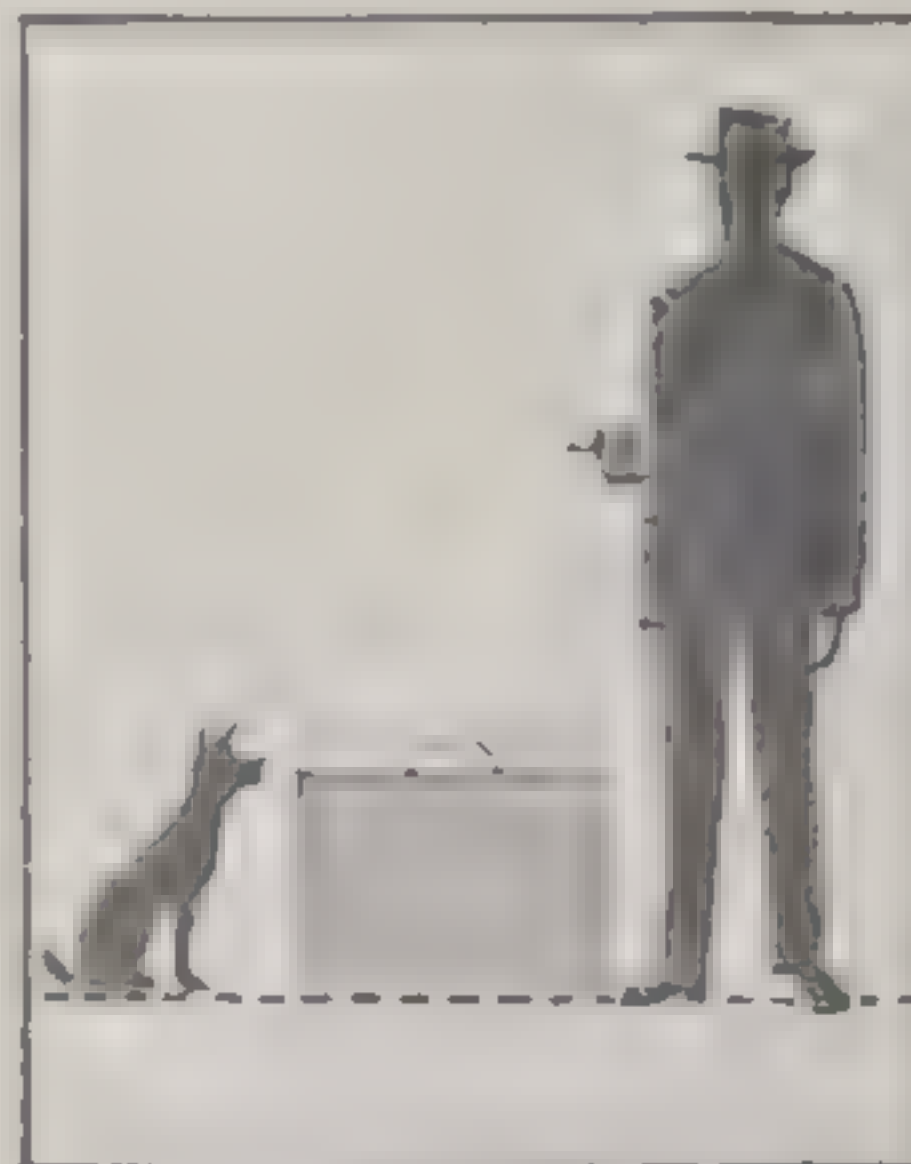
On this page we show you some more common-sense rules for arranging objects inside the picture area. Study these rules carefully and fix them in your mind — they will help you to avoid unnecessary errors. Although our examples are very simple, the points that they make apply to much more complicated pictures also.



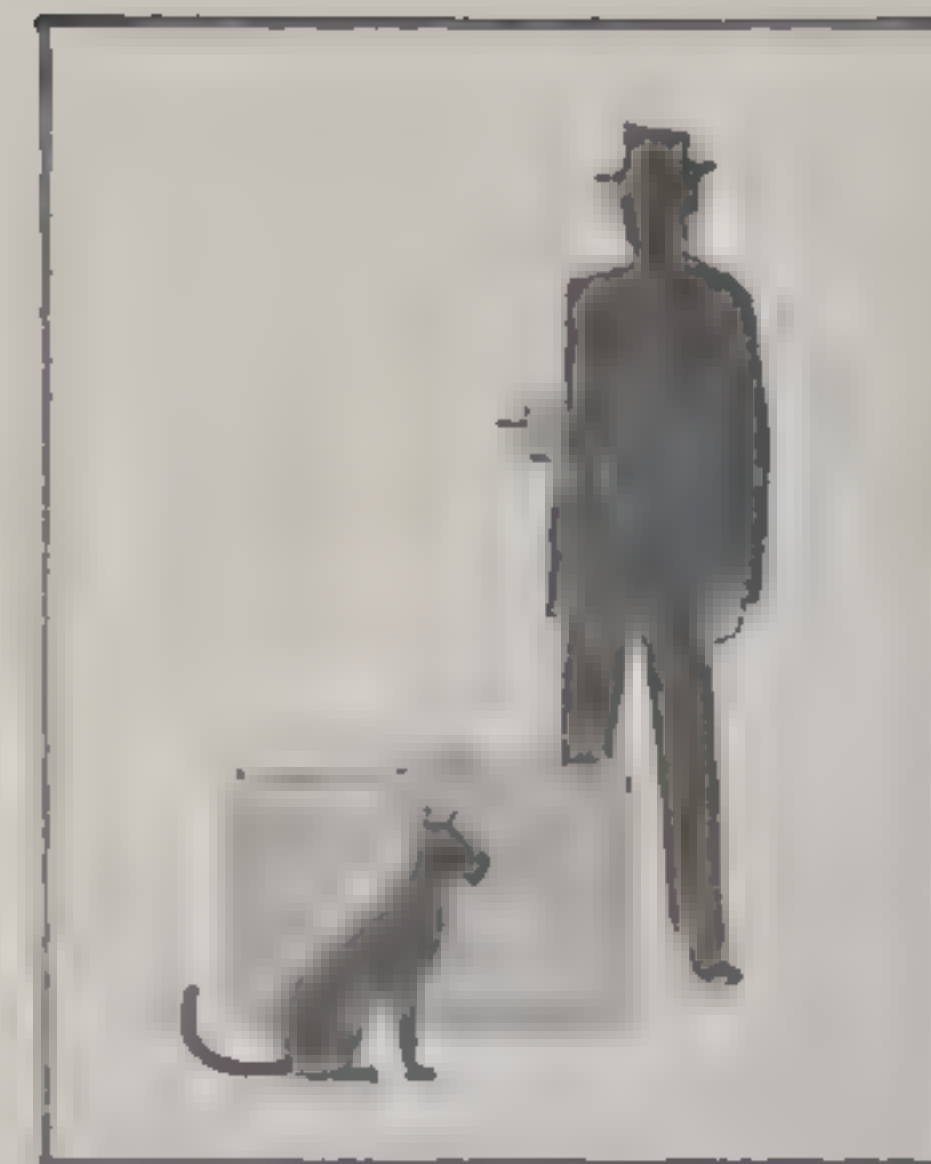
Don't split the picture in half: Everything is crowded into the right half of the picture, with the left side completely empty.



Use the whole picture area: Note that the figure is placed just enough off center to keep from splitting the picture in half.



Don't line things up: This kind of placement is monotonous. Things are placed on a line at equal intervals.



Vary the placement: Things look more interesting when they are varied in position and overlapped.



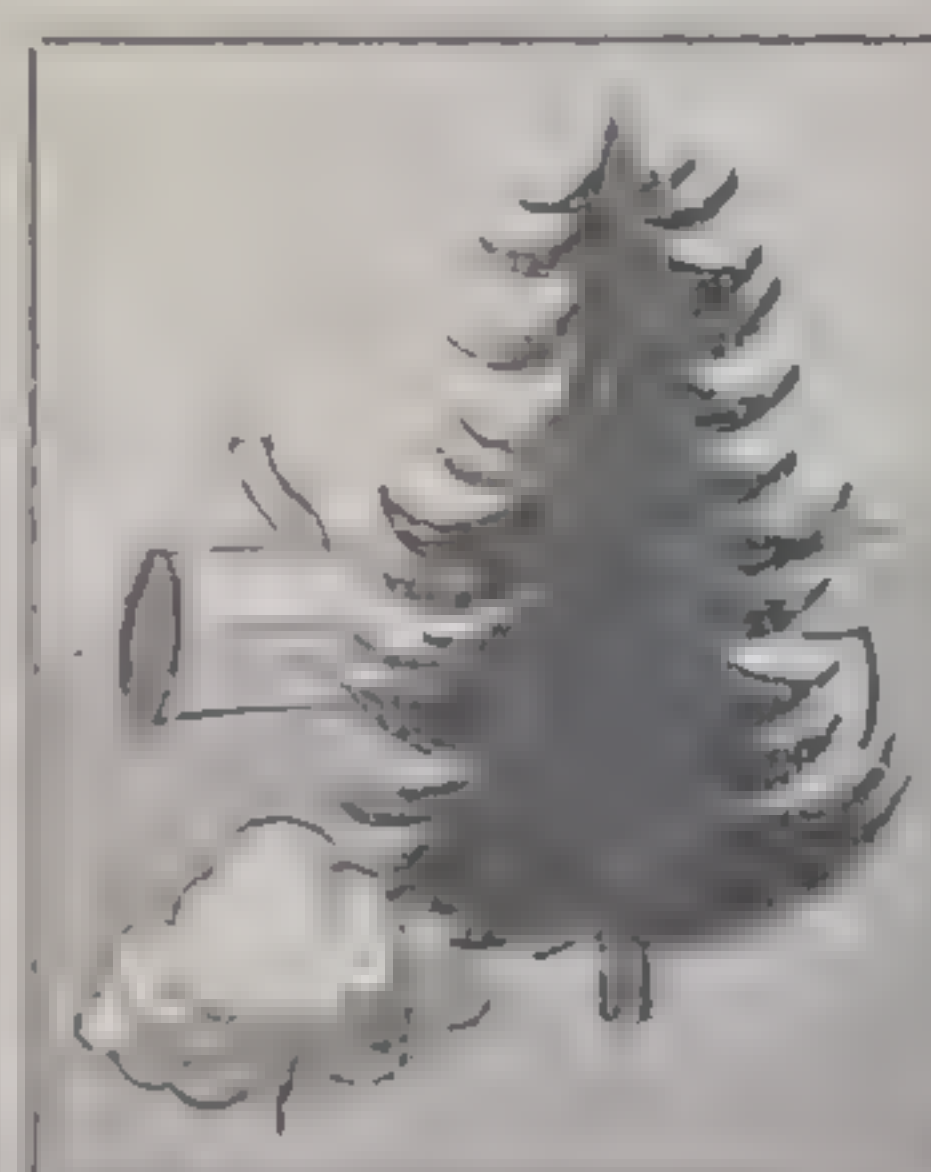
Don't crowd the bottom: Here the objects have been crowded into the bottom half of the picture and the upper half is empty.



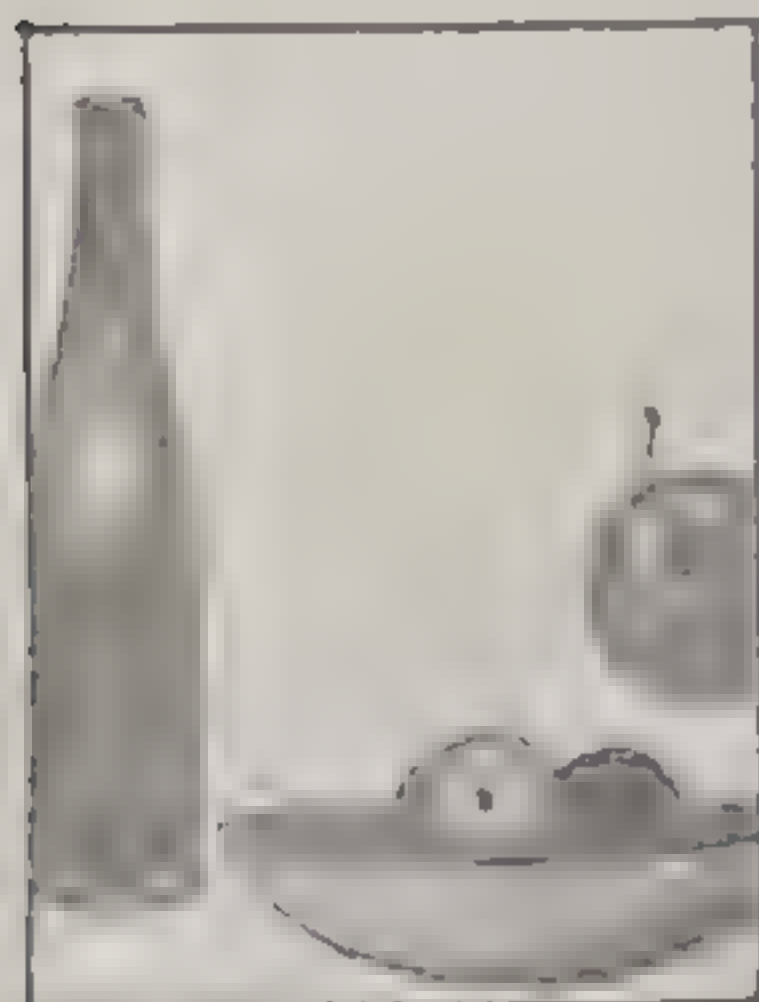
Use the upper half, too: It is a mistake to waste any of your picture area. Use the space in the upper half of the picture, too.



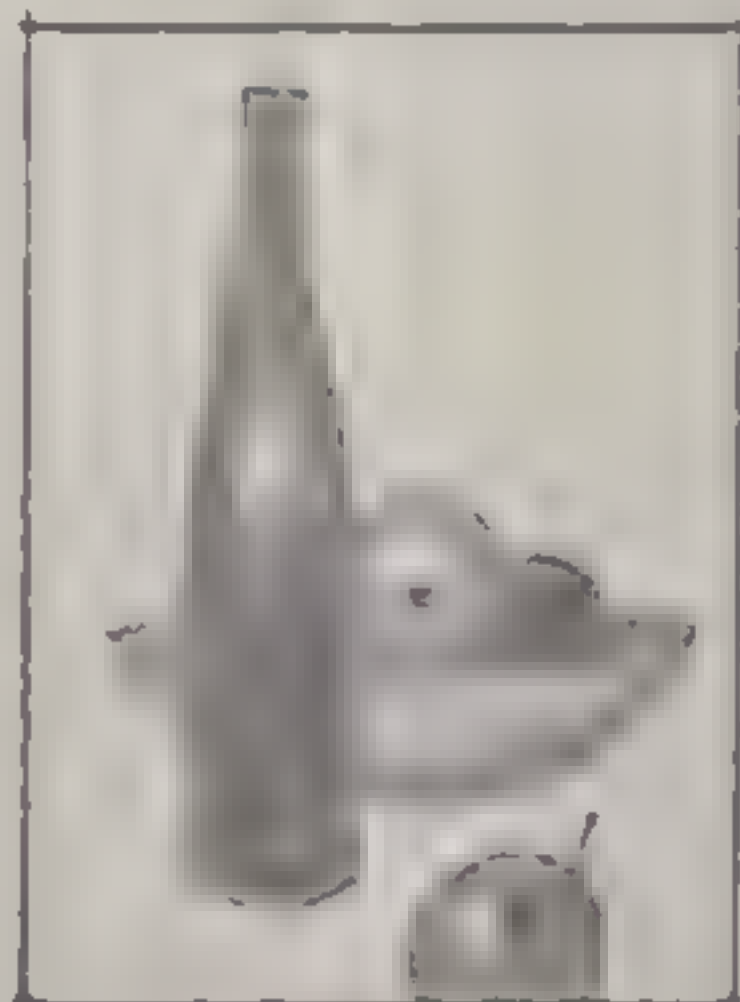
Don't center everything: Things are lined up vertically, and the result is monotonous. The objects seem to rest on top of each other.



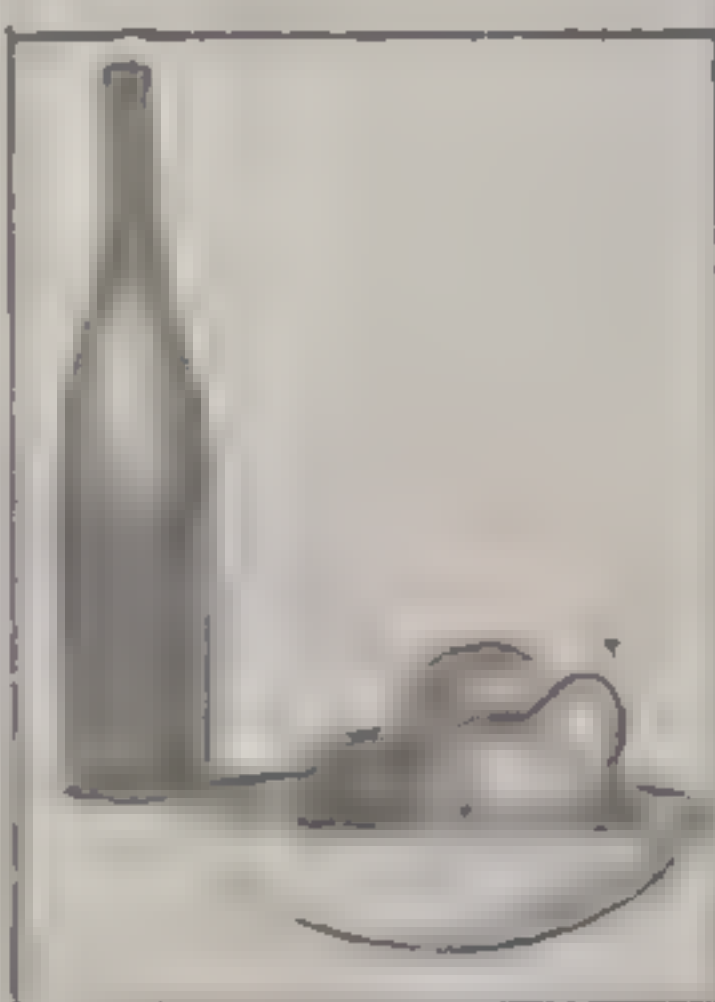
Move things to the side: This effect is more interesting because of variety in placement. The objects are behind each other in space.



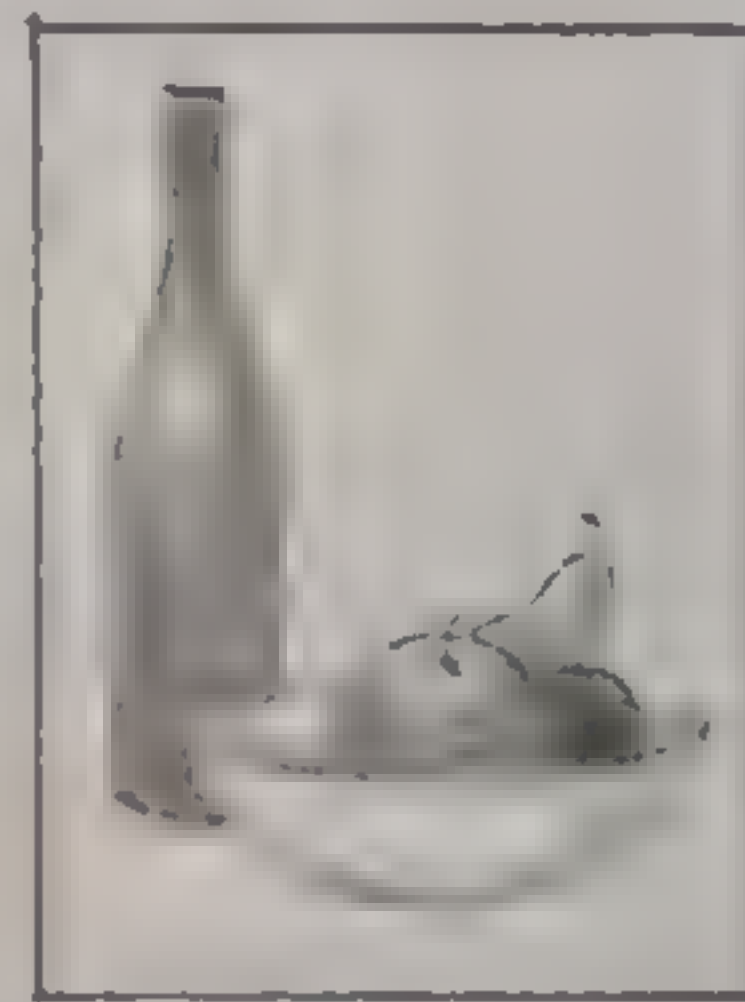
Don't leave a hole: This will happen if you line things up along the borders. The center of the picture becomes an empty hole.



Make good use of your space: The space in the center of your picture is important — put it to good use. Here is just one possibility.



Don't let objects just touch: The bottle appears to be resting on the bowl — and both objects seem to frame the white space.



Overlap the objects: Raise the bowl and make it overlap the bottle. Bowl no longer touches border, and there is a better feeling of balance.

Using the picture area

Titian often painted pictures containing many figures. The strong impact and emotional power of these paintings is due in large part to the skill with which he composed the figures within the picture area. Titian obviously gave a great deal of thought to the size of the figures and to where he should place them. In overlapping his figures he made sure that the important identifying characteristics of each showed up clearly. This picture is a fine example of how this great master composed, putting to use the same principles of size, placement, and overlapping that you have been studying.

In the diagram at the left we have reduced the complex group of figures to a single shape to demonstrate to you how Titian combined them into one large powerful unit. This unit dominates the picture space, forcing the viewer to become intimately involved at once with the portentous moment that is the subject of the picture.



TITIAN
The Entombment
The Louvre



Overlapping. Notice how Titian has helped to focus attention on the figure of the dead Christ by the careful way he has arranged and overlapped the other figures. In each case the artist made sure that enough of each figure was shown for us to understand its action fully. Although the head is in shadow we have no trouble recognizing the main figure, with its wounded hand and foot.

Depth

Depth, in a picture, is the illusion of distance or a third dimension. If your pictures are to create a strong sense of reality, you must suggest a feeling of depth in them. One way of getting this feeling of depth in pictures is to overlap things. Another way is to draw objects smaller as they get further from the eye.

In the painting below, note the dramatic illusion of depth. Bruegel achieved this by showing a hill close up in front, overlapping the background scene far below. We are immediately aware of the great contrast between the size of the hunters in the foreground and the people in the distance. See, too, how small the trees and houses become as they recede from the foreground. The landscape extends many miles, with the forms gradually becoming indistinguishable in the background.

Compare the effect of depth in this picture and the one by Ben Shahn. Shahn uses the wall in the background to cut off the view, thus keeping our attention on the figures.

BEN SHAHN
Handball
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund



This picture has a convincing feeling of depth. The painter created it by making the more distant figures progressively smaller than the near ones.



PIETER BRUEGEL
Hunters in the Snow
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



As these two diagrams show, the position in depth where you place your objects helps control the effect of your picture. At left the hunters are in the foreground and the dogs are so close to us they are cropped by the bottom edge of the picture. This gives us a feeling of nearness—of involvement in the action. At right the forms are in the middle ground. We view them from a distance and have less of a sense of being in the midst of things.



This is a poor use of three-dimensional space. All three figures stand on the same line and the effect is one of flatness rather than depth.



Here depth is suggested slightly more than in the preceding diagram, but the total effect is monotonous because the figures still stand in a line.



This is by far the most interesting arrangement. The figures are overlapped to make full use of the three-dimensional plane.



The same principles apply, regardless of subject matter. These three objects look flat and uninteresting because they are in a straight line.



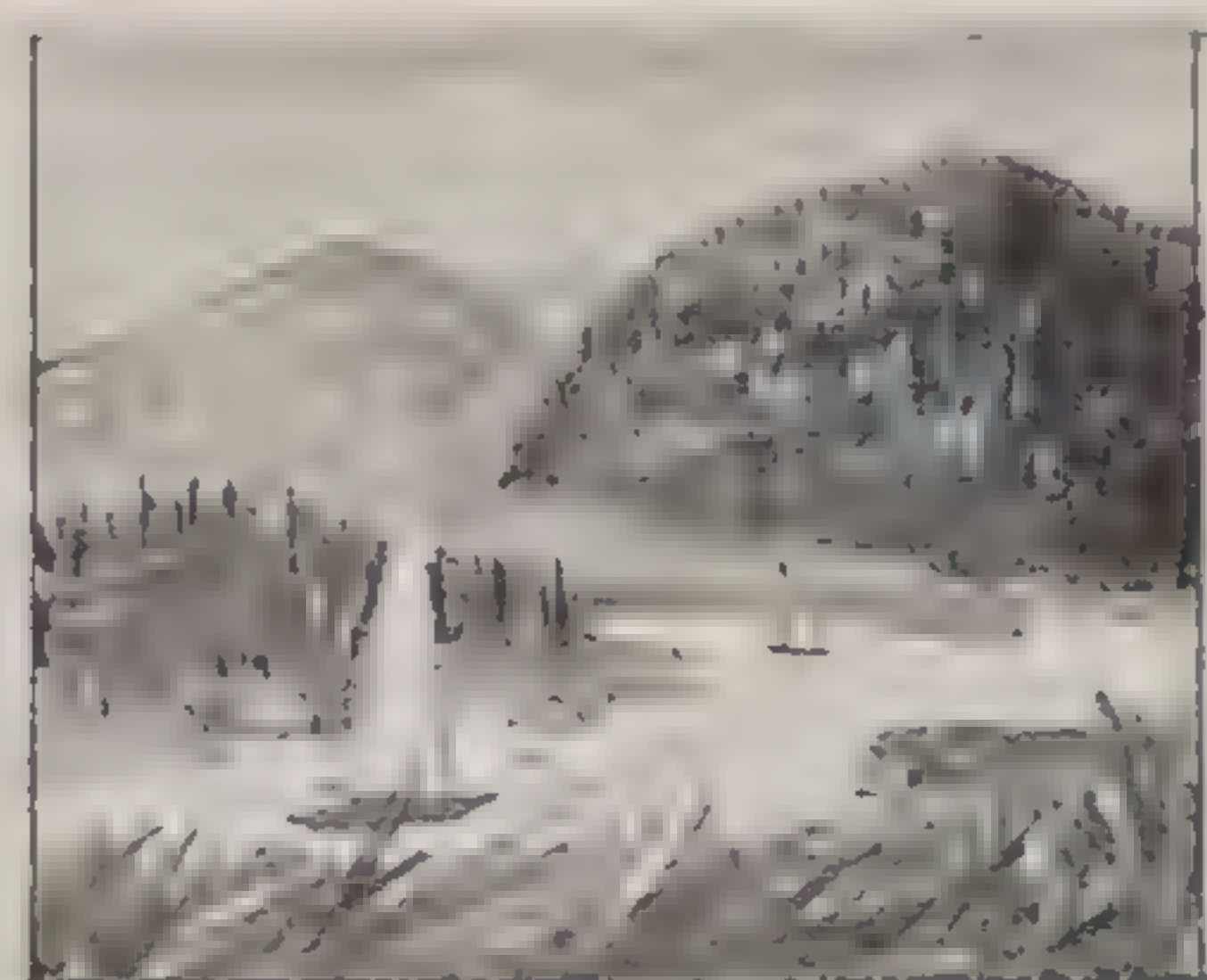
Here things are arranged in a monotonous triangle. The objects crowd the borders. Overlapping would have created a stronger illusion of reality.



This is a better arrangement because the objects have been overlapped and the placement makes interesting use of the three-dimensional plane.



There is no overlapping here. The flatness is emphasized by the similar shapes of foreground and water and the mountains. The far shore seems to be on top of the boats.



The varied shapes of foreground and water now carry our eye gently back into the picture. Note the effect of distance created by the overlapped mountains and staggered boats.

Use depth in an interesting way

Overlapping, cropping and making objects appear smaller as they recede into the distance are useful devices for giving pictures a sense of depth, an illusion of reality. It is not enough, however, to create depth in a composition — we must do it in an interesting way.

The drawings on this page show right and wrong ways of suggesting depth in pictures. Unless there is some special reason for it, do not line up objects in a row, crowd them into a half or a quarter of the picture depth, or arrange them in a regular or obvious design, such as a cross or a triangle. It is much better to place things so that they make a varied, informal, and interesting pattern in depth.

Often the interest in a picture can be increased by selecting a different view from the one you start with. In the first view the objects may be all of a size or lined up at regular intervals. By taking another view, it may be possible to stagger the objects at different intervals, to make some large and some small for the sake of variety. You might try a view from the side in place of one from the front, or change the angle of vision in some other way. There are always new possibilities worth considering.

Don't ever be satisfied with an ordinary composition or keep repeating the same few basic arrangements in your pictures. Try to create something new. Think — experiment — move your objects around in depth until you arrive at arrangements that are different and interesting. That is what the best artists do.

GERARD TER BORCH
The Concert
Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz
Staatliche Museen Gemäldegalerie
Berlin



Overlapping creates depth

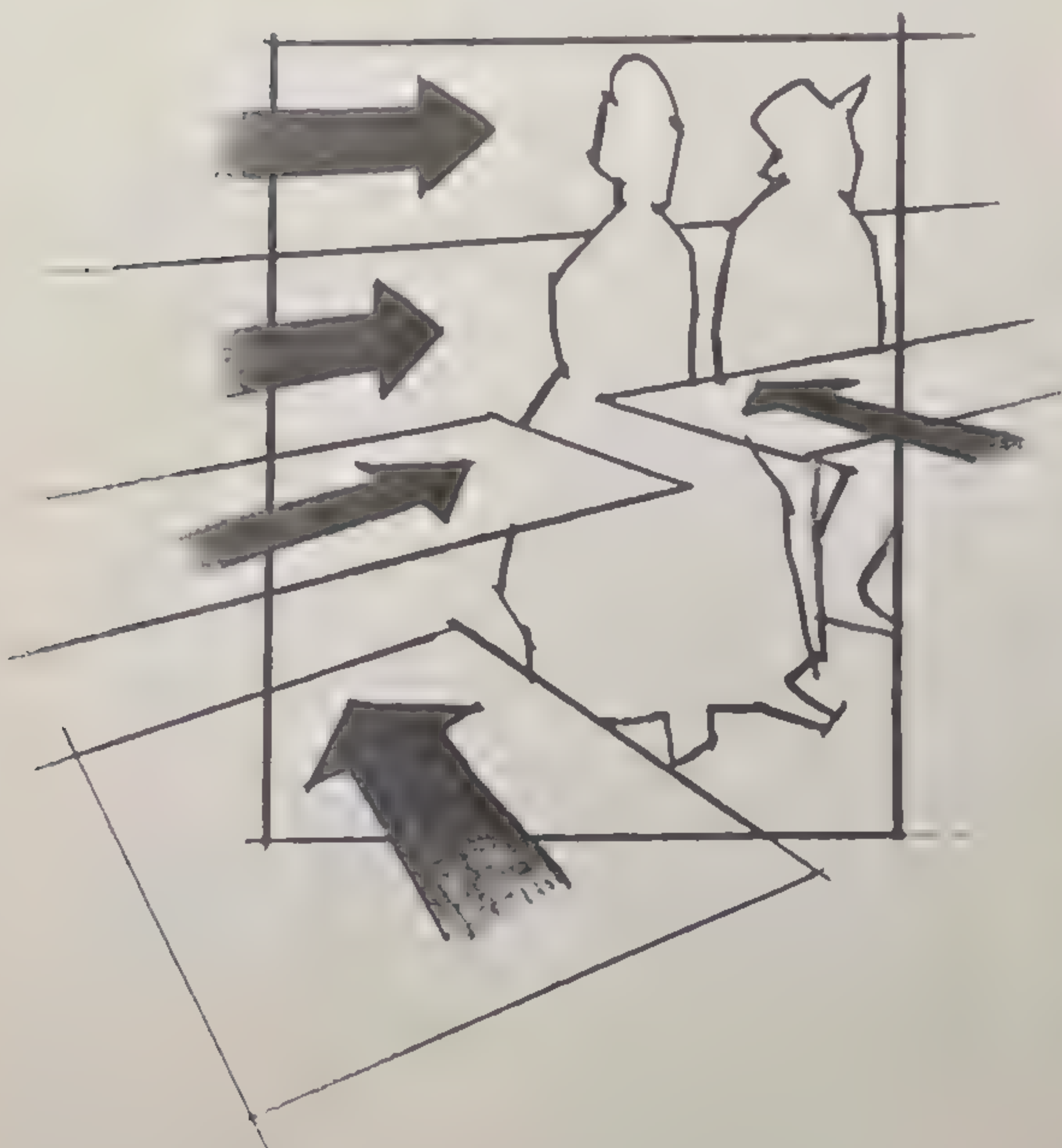
The way the painter overlapped the forms in his picture is mainly responsible for the illusion of depth here. The woman in the foreground overlaps the spinet, and the spinet overlaps the other woman, as the diagram emphasizes. You can also see how making similar forms—in this case the women—smaller as they get further from us enhances the feeling of depth.



EDGAR DEGAS
Absinthe
The Louvre, Paris

Perspective and depth

Perspective plays a part in giving this painting its convincing feeling of depth. The tabletop in the foreground takes our eye back into the picture. The tabletops in the rear, the seat back, and mirror narrow as they extend into space. Overlapping helps significantly, too.

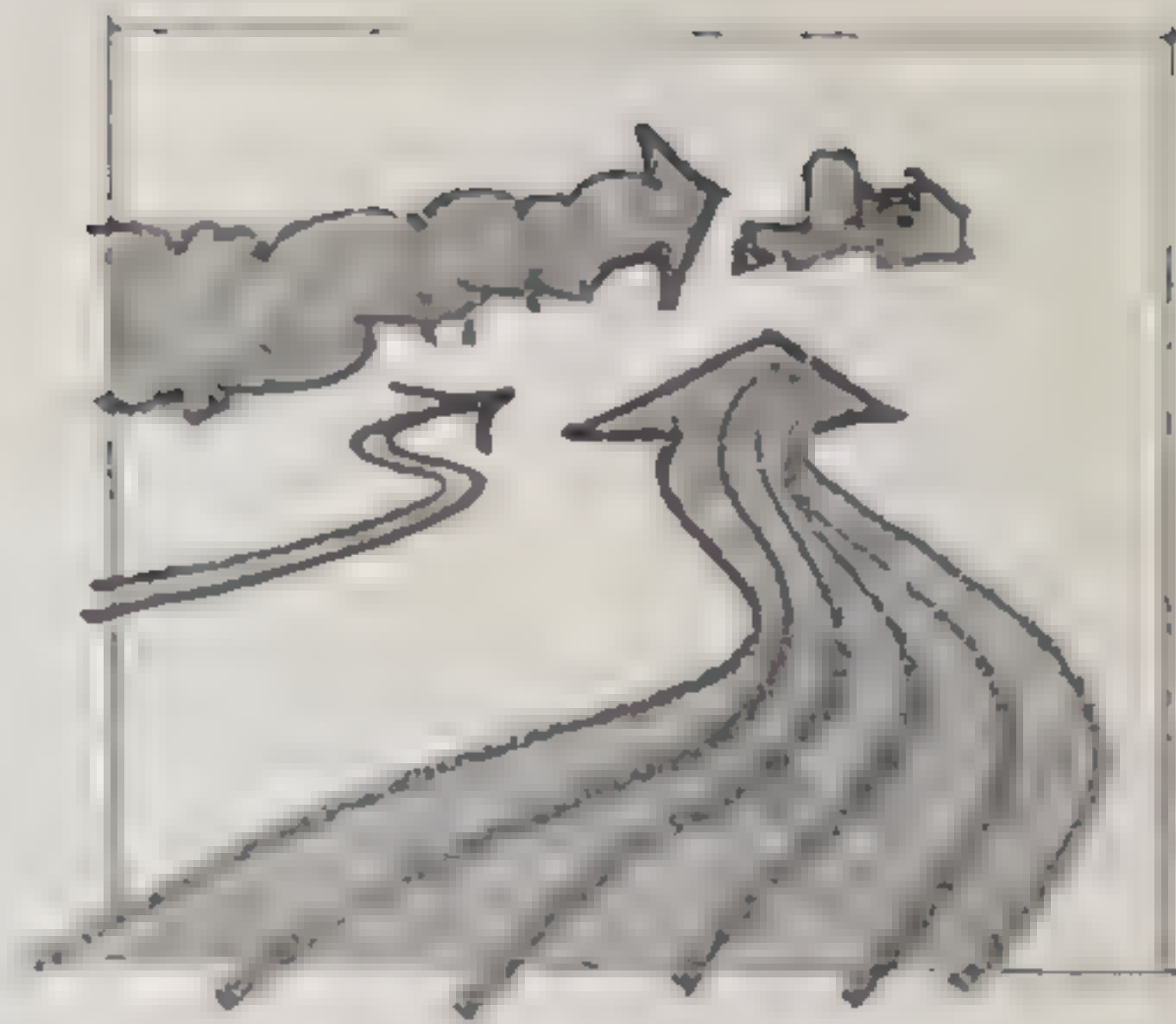


© Curtis Publishing Co. 1945



Design in depth — *PETER HELCK*

In this cover illustration for a farm magazine, Helck's center of interest is the two figures and the tractor and plow. He drew them large and placed them in the left foreground, so they would dominate the scene. He arranged the plowed furrows to carry our eye sharply back over the hillside to the farm — and further emphasized this movement into depth by the direction of the tractor and the road at the left, as well as the gesture of the farmer.

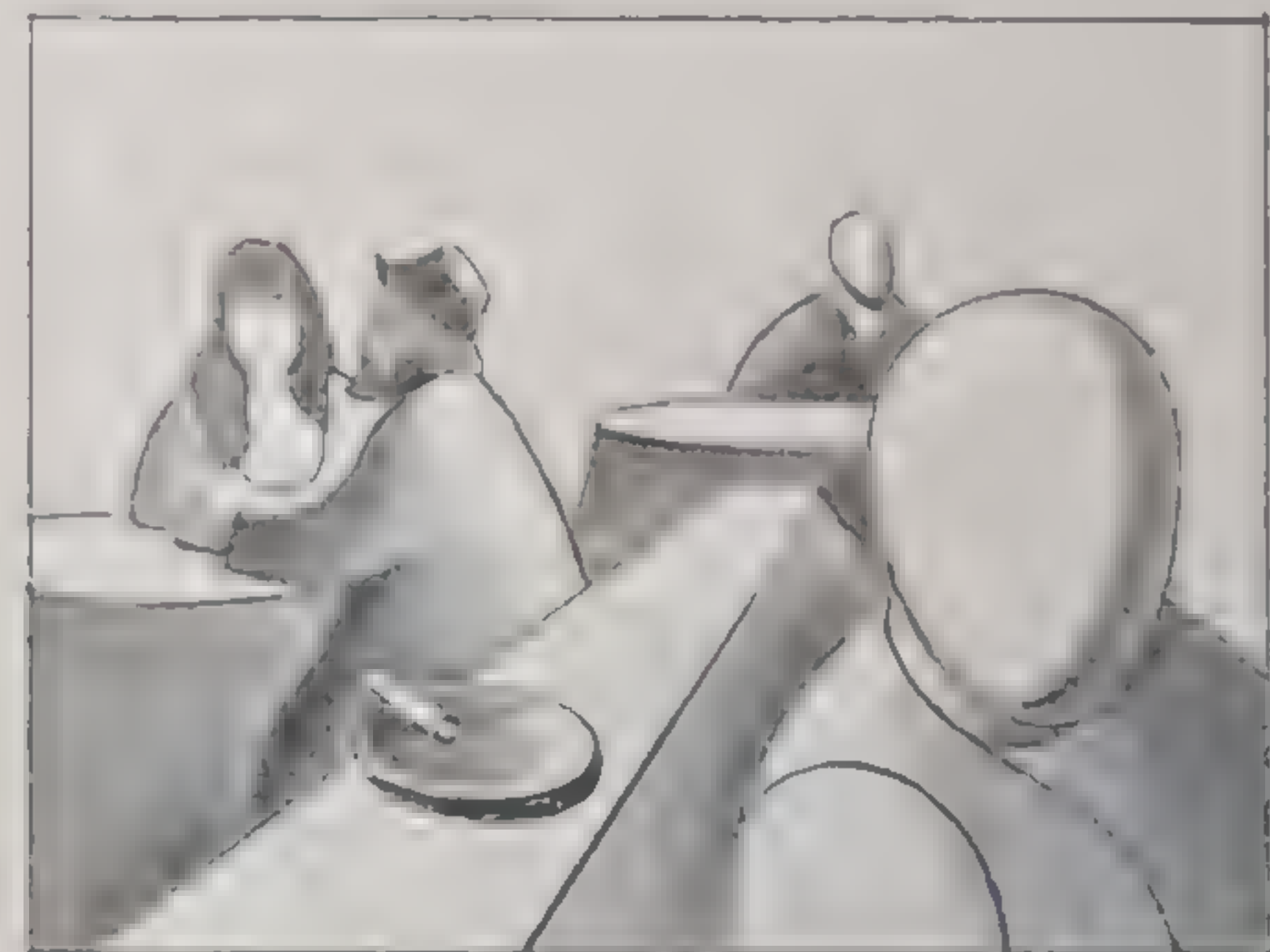


The feeling of depth is greatly strengthened by the lines of the plowed furrows, which narrow as they extend into the background. These furrows and the strips of trees in the background lead our eye inevitably to the farm buildings in the distance.



The shapes in the foreground are carefully overlapped to reveal the identifying features of the tractor and plow as well as the typical gestures of the two figures. They are placed to direct our attention into the depth of the picture.

Courtesy Esquire



Groupings in depth — *Stahl*

Ben Stahl had three sets of figures to arrange in this room, and he composed them to create a striking effect of depth. He made the most important figure largest and placed him in the foreground. The others he made smaller and placed them further back, staggering the groups for variety and interest. The diagonal created by the bench top pulls our eye sharply back into the room and strengthens the sense of depth. Note that the ash tray is actually larger than the figures at the rear.

Line

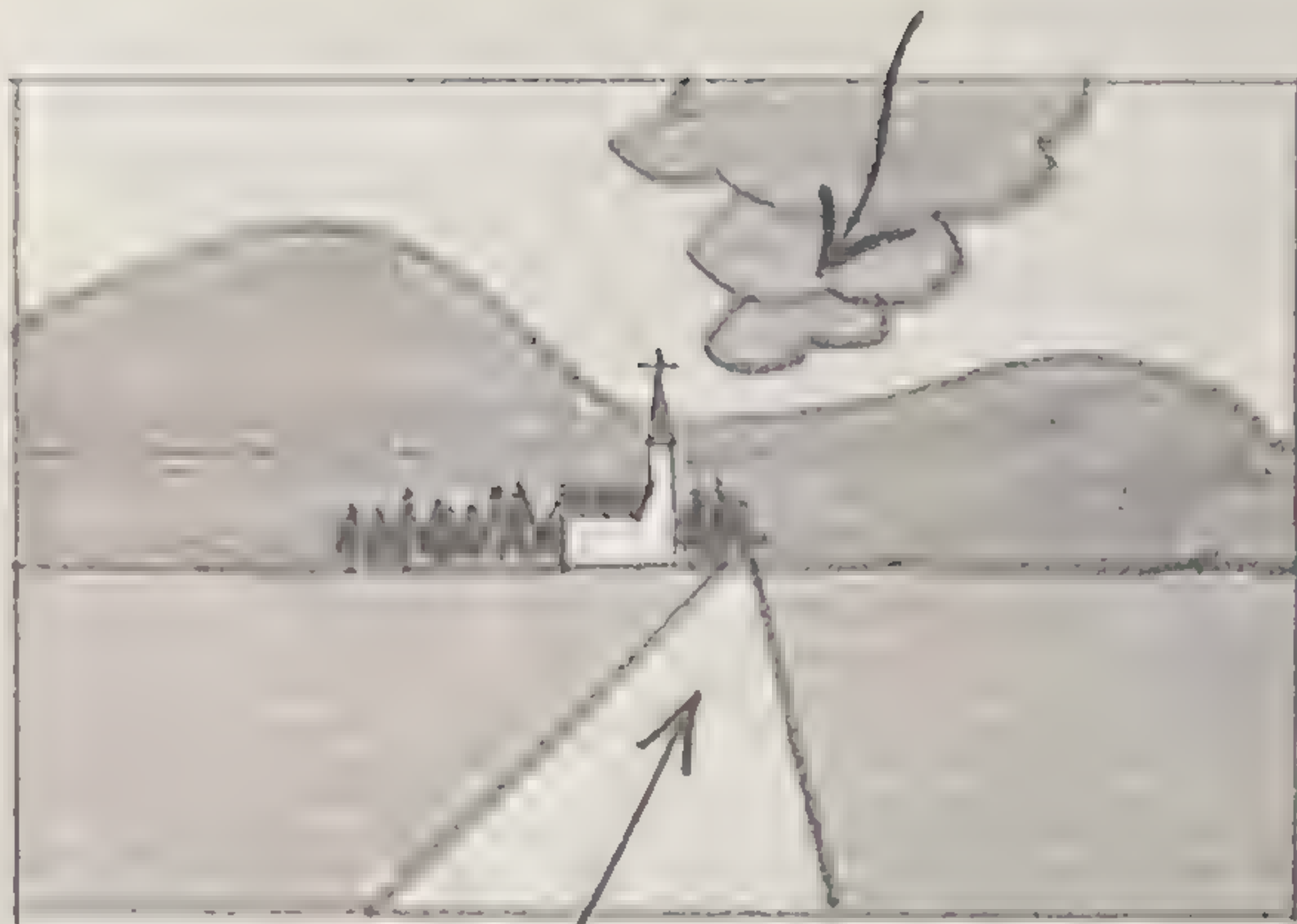


The term line, as we use it in composition, means the direction in which our eye moves when we look at a picture. We create this directional kind of line by arranging the forms in the picture so that their shapes or their main lines lead the eye unconsciously to a center of interest.

Controlling the movement of the viewer's eye within the picture borders is a very important part of picture making. The artist must always be aware of what the lines in his pictures do. In composing a picture we must plan these lines to help guide the viewer's eye. We should make sure that one line leads to another, and ultimately to some center of interest. If we work unthinkingly, we may create strong lines that lead to unimportant parts of the painting or out of it altogether.

It is also important to be aware of the type of movement that directional line creates. It can move our eye along quite smoothly and rhythmically from one thing to another, grouping and relating objects which belong together. On the other hand, the movement may be abrupt — the artist may purposefully create a clash of lines. This may be appropriate if he is drawing a scene of violence or conflict.

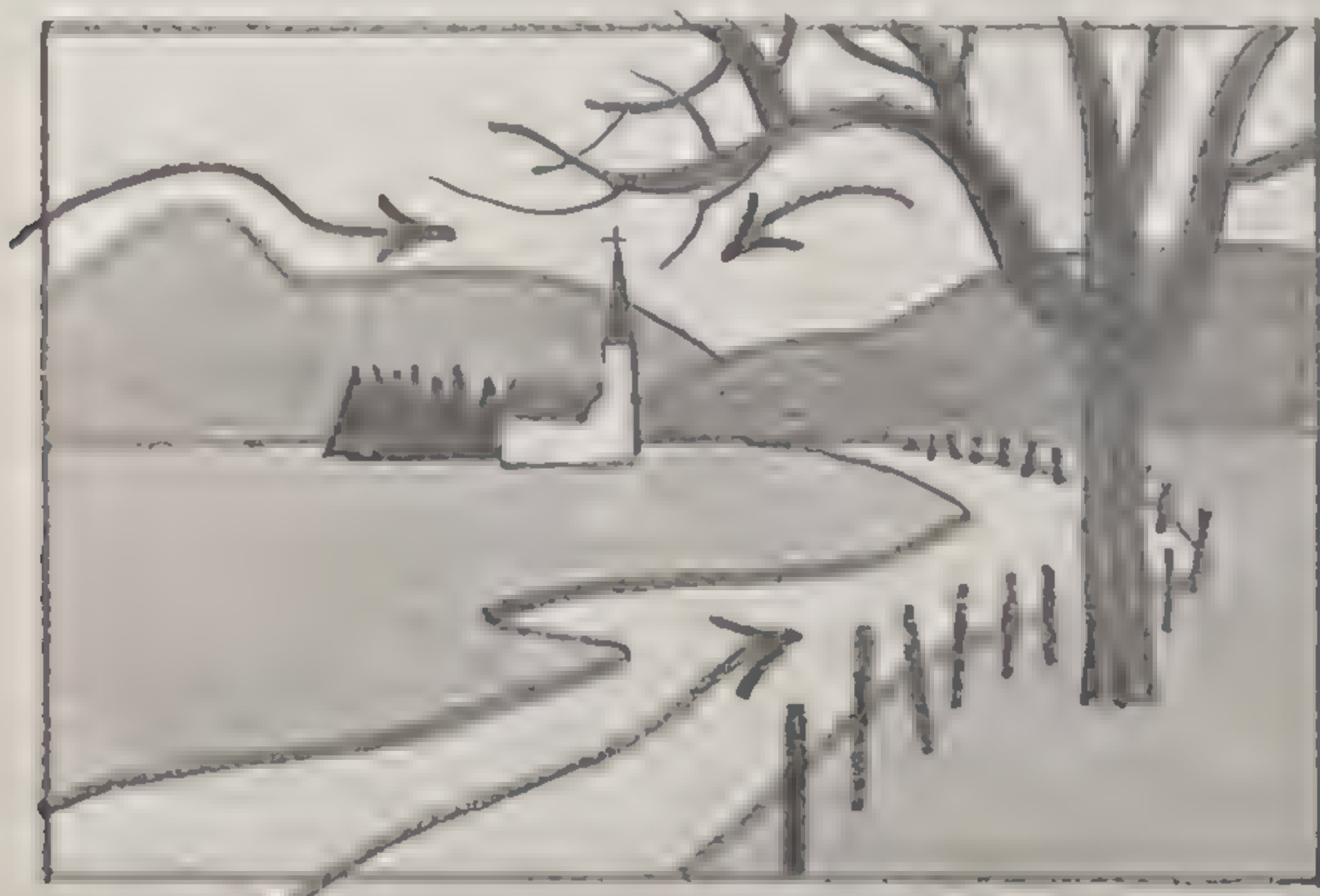
Line can be a strong force or a subtle one — but it should always lead the viewer so that he will see and feel the things we want him to.



Here is an obvious use of line to point out the center of interest in a picture. The converging sides of the road and the overlapping clouds are deliberately placed to lead our eye to the church. Even the line of the mountains intersects and further draws our attention to the church.



This is what could happen if our placement of lines were thoughtless. Now, instead of leading our eye to the church, the major lines lead past it. The clouds even lead our eye out of the picture. Such a scene might be found in nature but not in a well-composed picture.



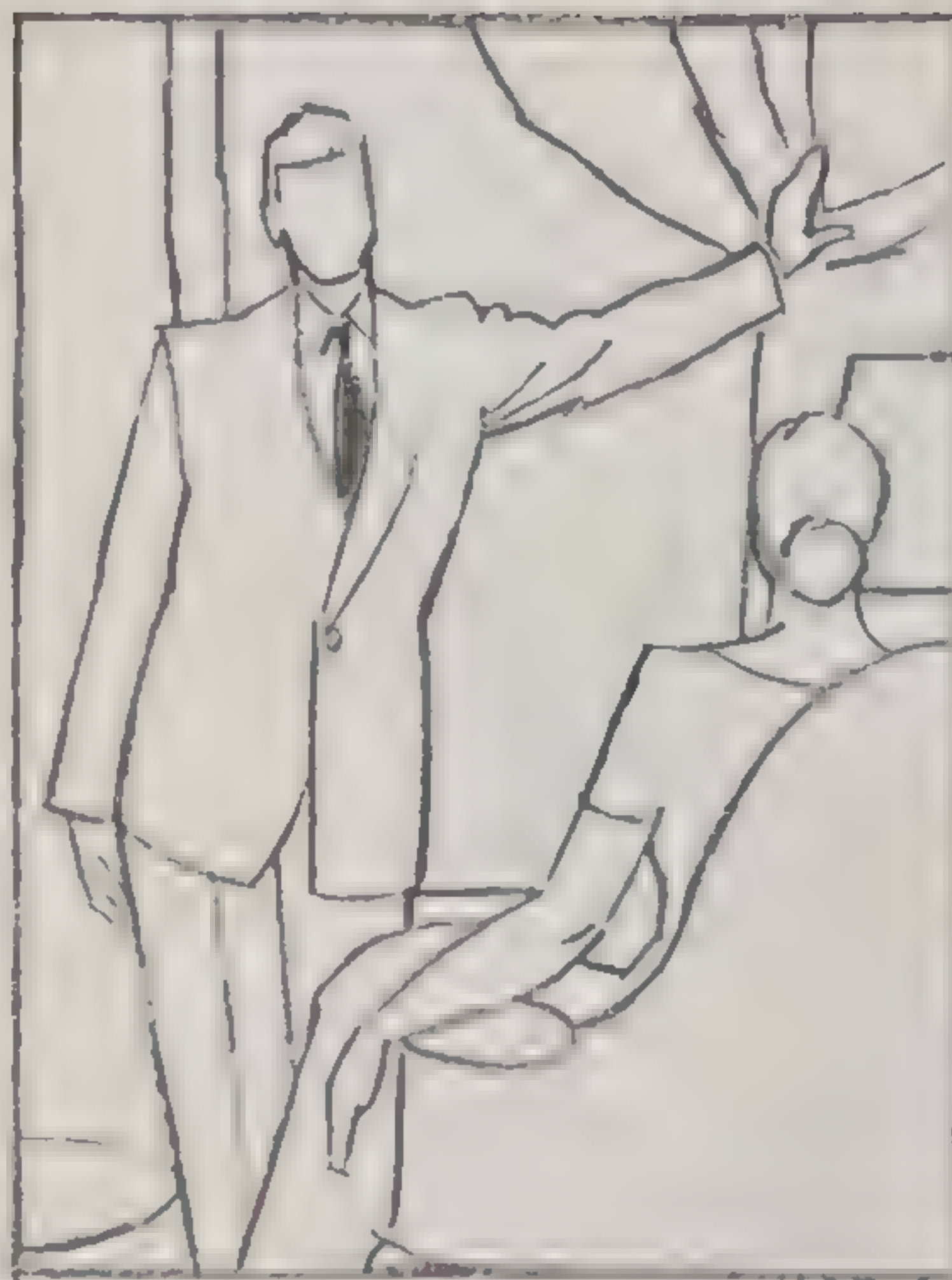
Here is a less obvious example of the use of line. Our eye enters the picture in the lower left corner and moves along the road. This movement is picked up by the tree trunk, and carried out through the branch to the church. Again the mountains intersect the steeple.



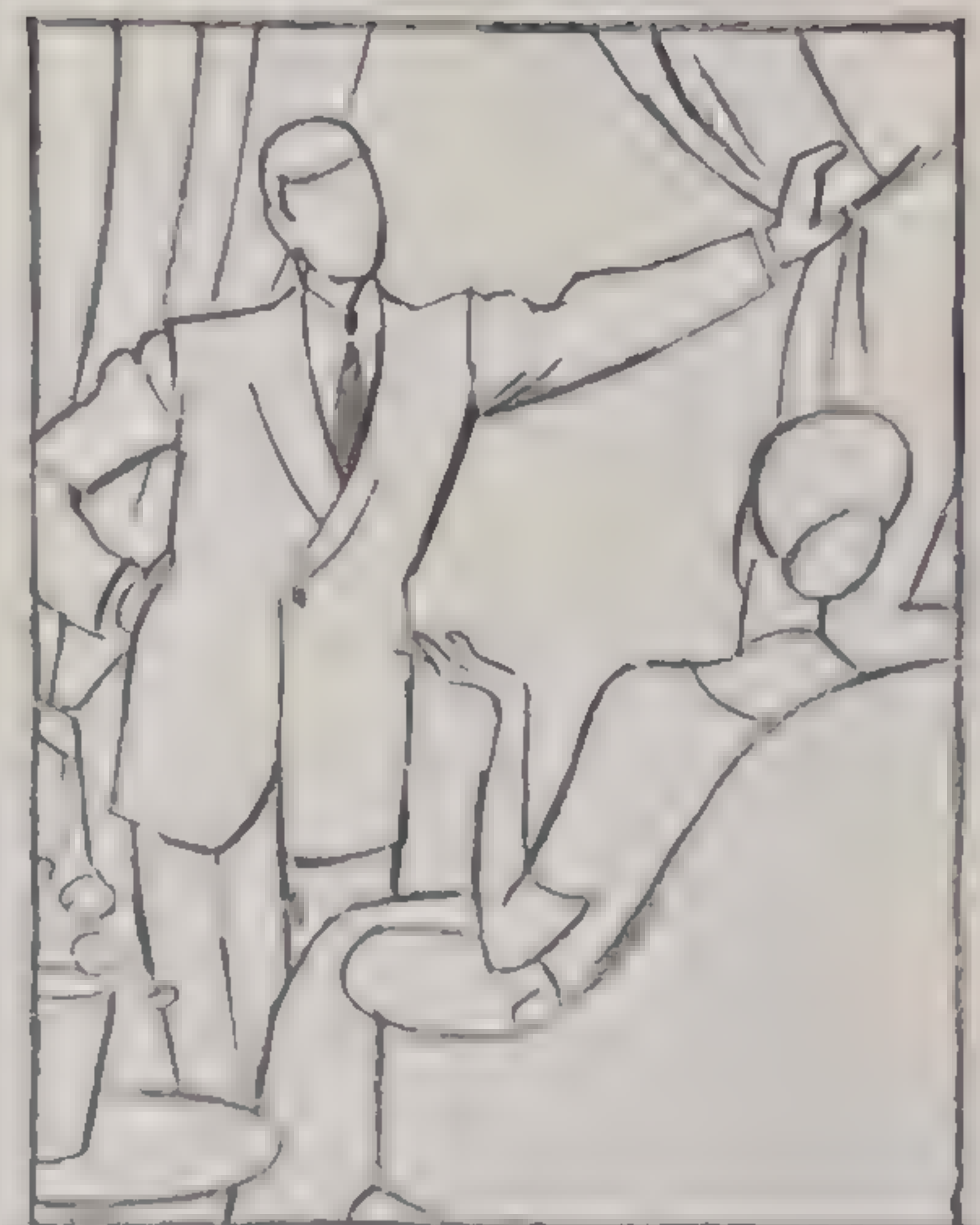
All of the lines in this picture work against good composition. The lines of the mountains and road, and the rows of trees and fence posts carry our eye past the center of interest and out the left or right borders. The large tree leads our attention out of the picture.



1 This first attempt at composing two figures in the picture space is very weak. The lines of the man's suit are confused by those of the drape behind him. The lampshade hits the edge of the other drape and confuses the lines of the woman's head. The window in the center is an empty, wasted space. Our eye is pulled down and out the bottom border by the converging lines of the woman's hand, the drape, and the man's side.



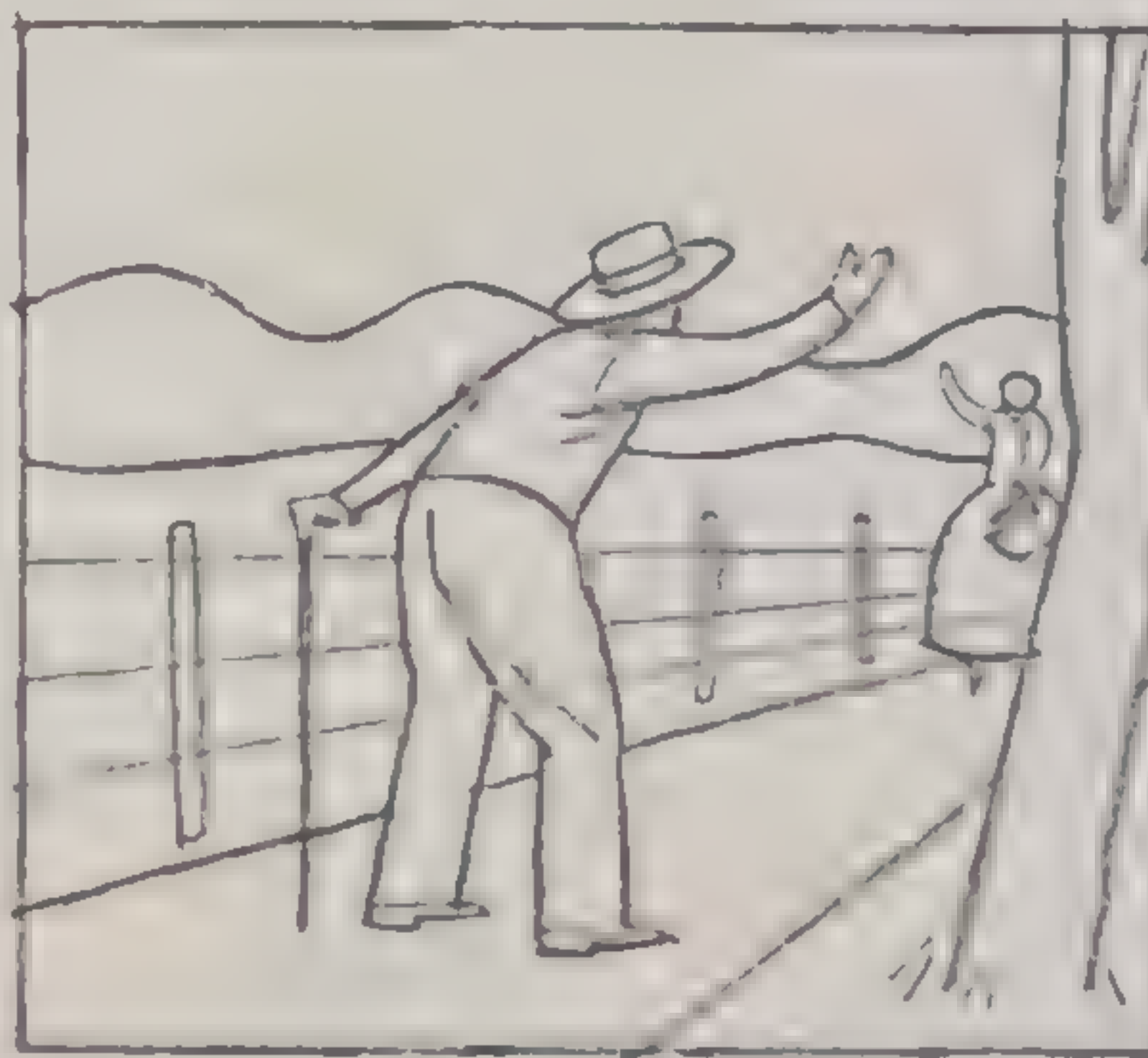
2 By moving the man to the right and raising his arm we greatly improve the center area. The dull rectangle of the window has been broken into two interesting irregular shapes. By showing more of the chair we move the woman out of the corner. However, the side of her head comes together with the drape confusingly and her arm still leads to the bottom. We have added a coffee table in the corner but it bumps the man's leg.



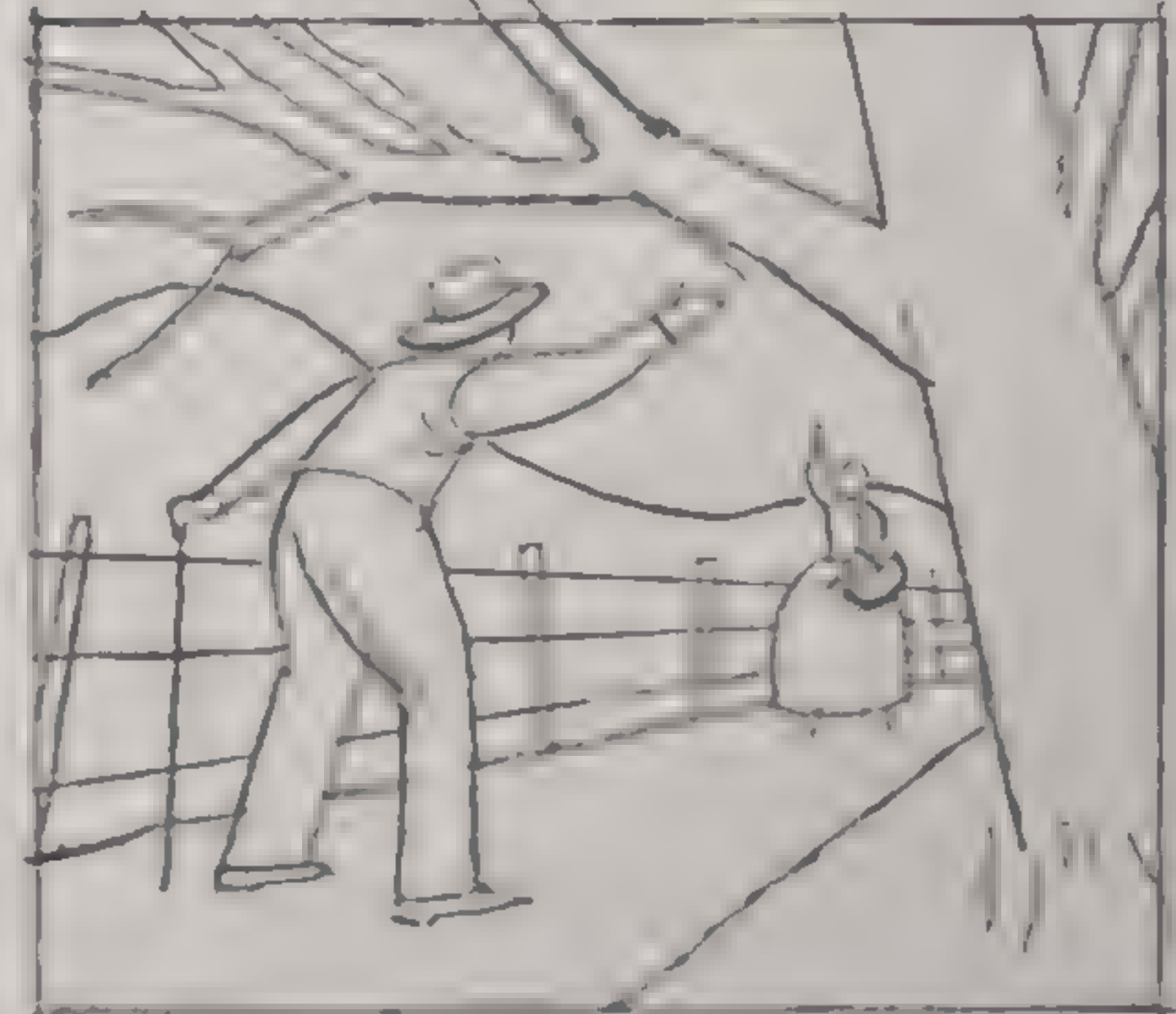
3 Finally we change the woman's pose to tie the whole composition together. Now her left arm leads up and over to the man, the graceful line of her hand being continued in his hand-on-hip gesture. Her head has been moved to the left of the edge of the drape and the lamp has been moved back. The table is shifted to the right to block the movement of skirt and trouser lines out the bottom border.



1 Almost every main line in this picture works against good composition. The lines of the road, fence, and hill carry our eye sharply to the left border. Even the tree leans out of the picture. The man's arm runs into the top line of the hill.



2 See how much easier it is to focus on both the man and girl when the strong lines of the road and fence are turned around to lead to her. The tree helps to block movement out of the right border but it still leans out of the picture. The man's arm and the line of the hill are less confusing.



3 This is still better. The girl has been moved to the left, so that she is no longer partly concealed by the tree. Dropping the hill line makes both man and girl stand out more clearly. The tree trunk and branches turn our eye movement back into the picture and help frame the two figures.

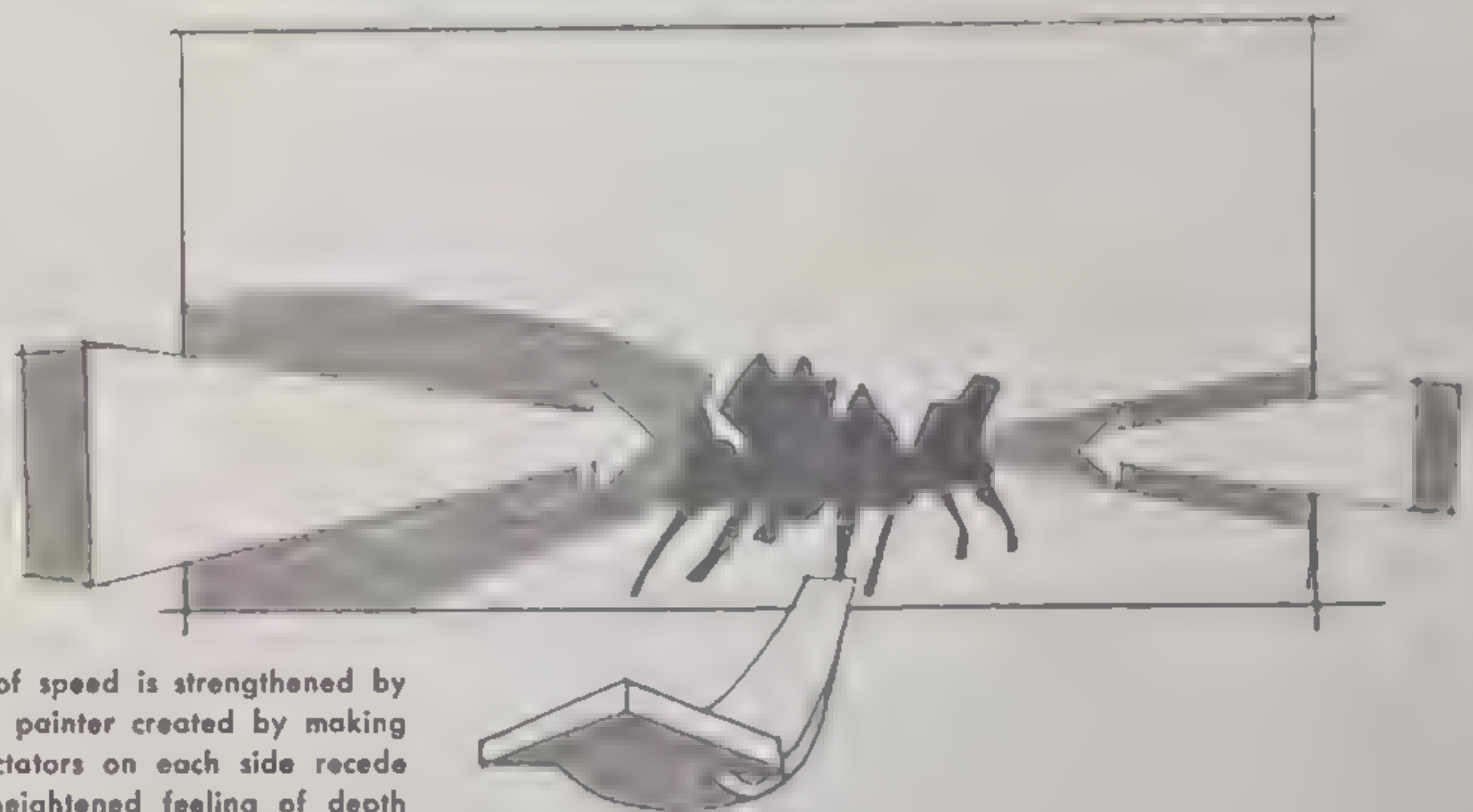
Using line to full advantage

The demonstrations above show you, step by step, how weak, confusing compositions can be strengthened and clarified by more thoughtful use of line. When you plan a picture, make it a point to study the direction of the lines in your rough sketch. Decide whether or not your main lines keep the eye within the picture. Ask yourself: Do the background lines become confused with the lines of the center of interest? Are the lines crowded together or — just as undesirable — spaced at equal, monotonous intervals? Asking and answering questions like these will help you get the most out of the lines in your picture.

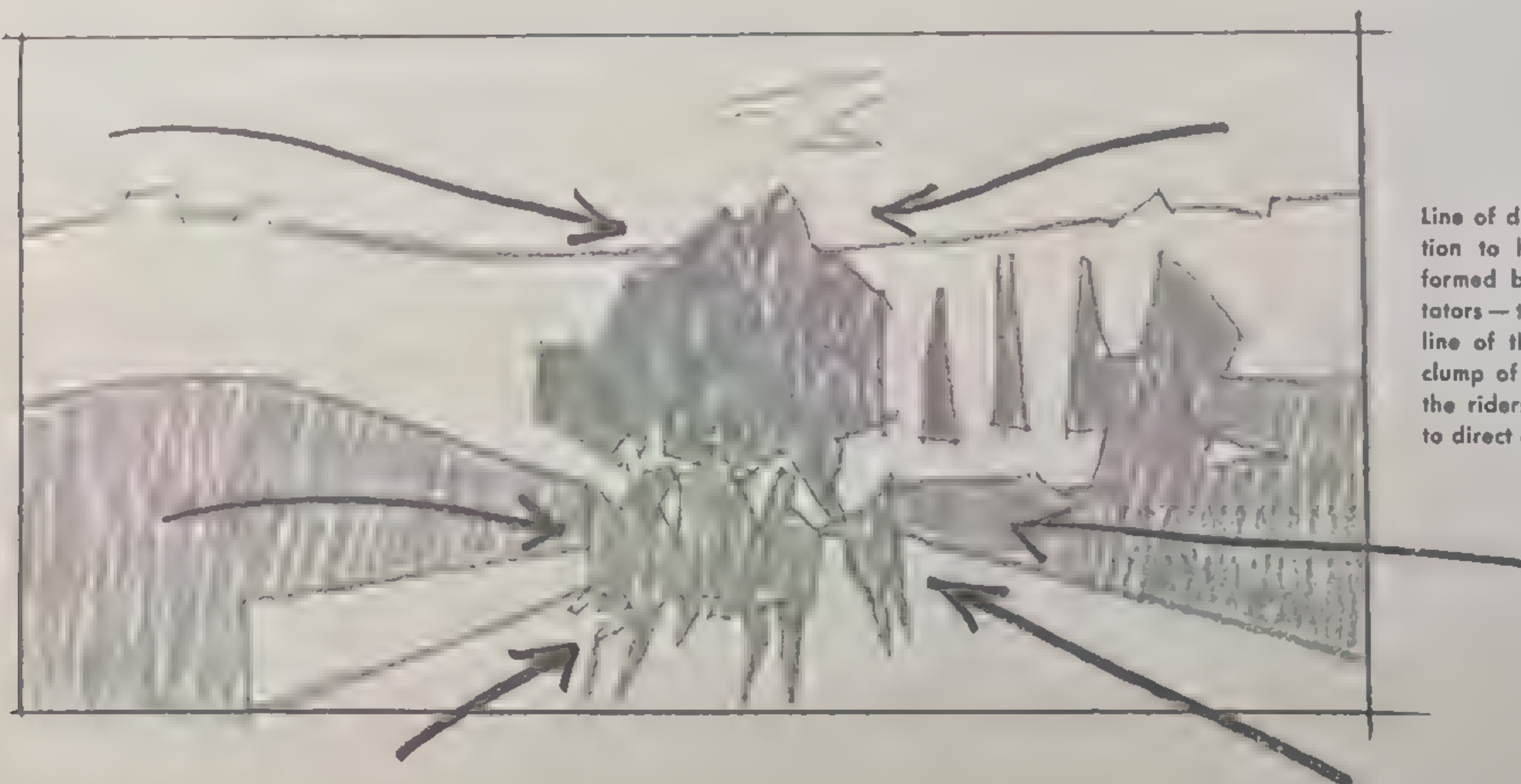
EDOUARD MANET
Races at Longchamp
The Art Institute of Chicago
Potter Palmer Collection



Edouard Manet's painting of a horse race conveys a sensation of speed and action with great effectiveness. Although the center of interest is in the middle of the picture, where it might create a static effect, this is avoided because of the care that Manet took in arranging his forms. Note, for example, the sense of movement produced by the extended legs and active shapes of the horses. Manet placed them almost at the front edge of the painting—it's as though in another instant they will gallop out of it.



As the arrows show, the feeling of speed is strengthened by the great sense of depth that the painter created by making the track and the masses of spectators on each side recede abruptly into the distance. This heightened feeling of depth emphasizes the forward thrust of the riders.



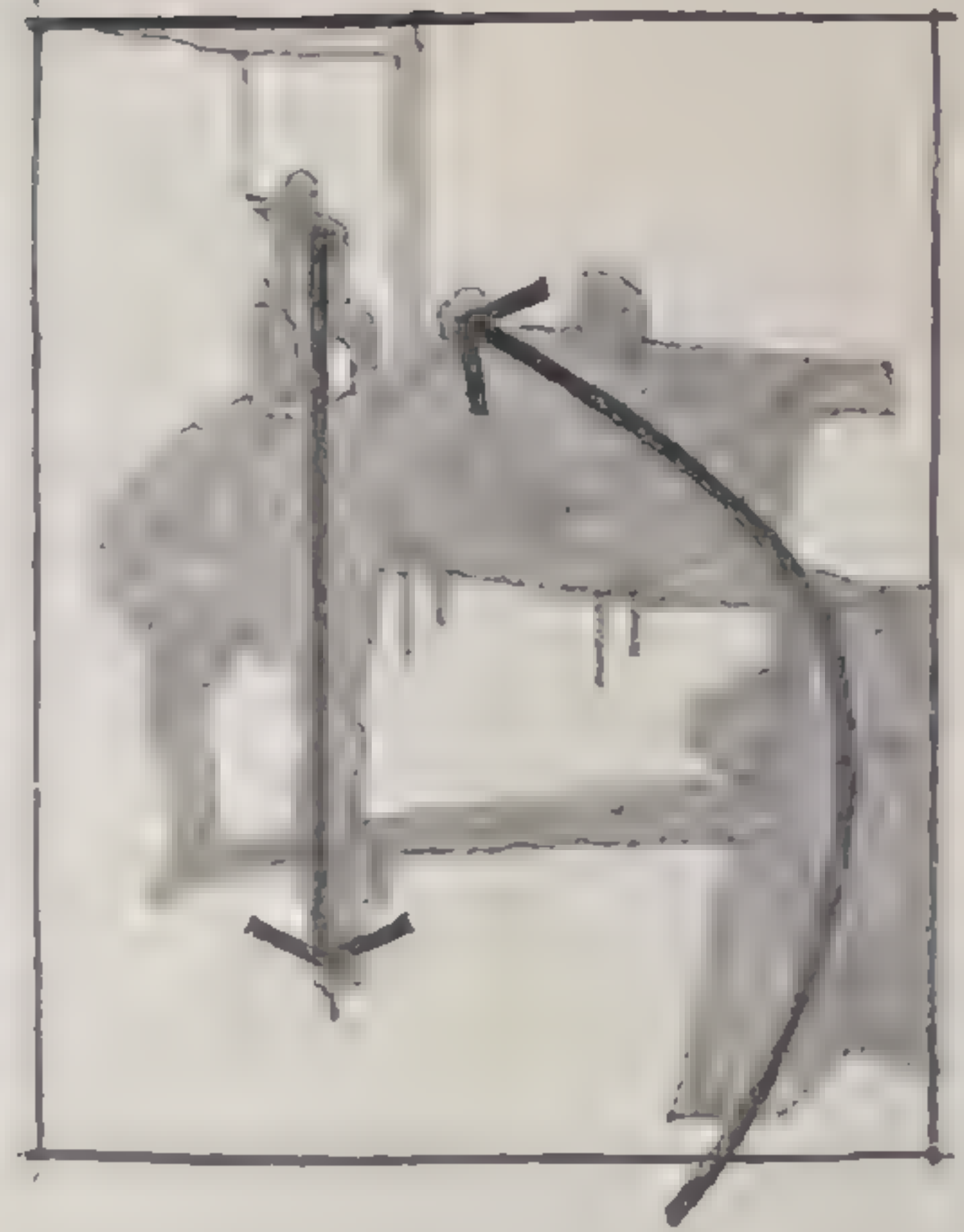
Line of direction is boldly used by Manet to guide our attention to his center of interest. Most striking are the lines formed by the edges of the track and the crowds of spectators—these run right into the horses. The gently rolling line of the landscape in the background leads to the dark clump of trees in the middle, which brings our eye down to the riders. The distant cloud over the dark clump also helps to direct our attention to Manet's center of interest.

Curtis Briggs

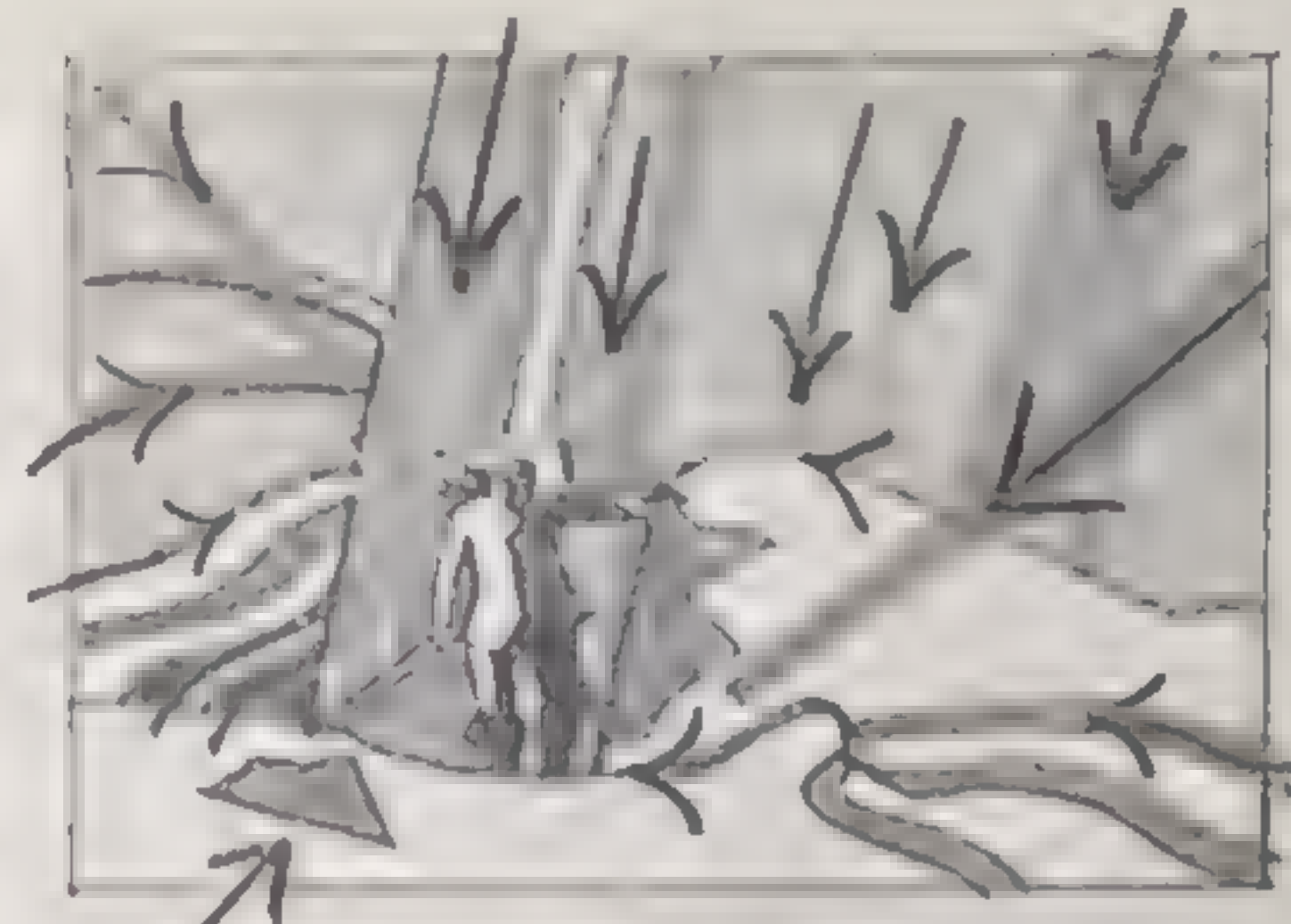
Here is an excellent example of controlled movement in an illustration. The emphasis is on movement in depth. Our eye starts at the lower right-hand corner and moves counter-clockwise as shown in the diagram. The glass on the floor becomes the ultimate focal center. Even the shadow on the rug guides our attention across the floor to the hand and glass.



© Curtis Publishing Co. 1952



Courtesy Kindred MacLean and Co.



PETER HELCK

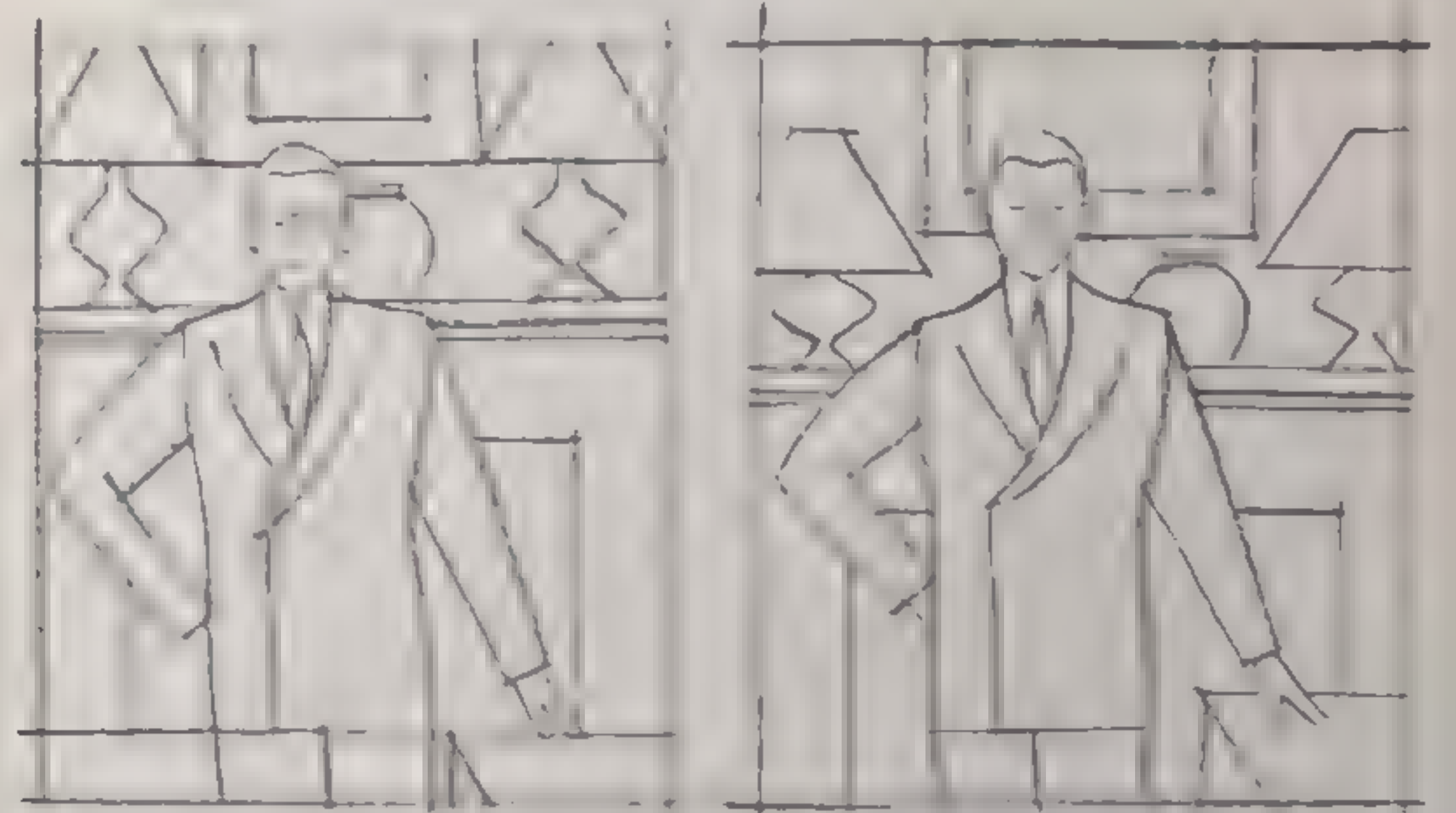
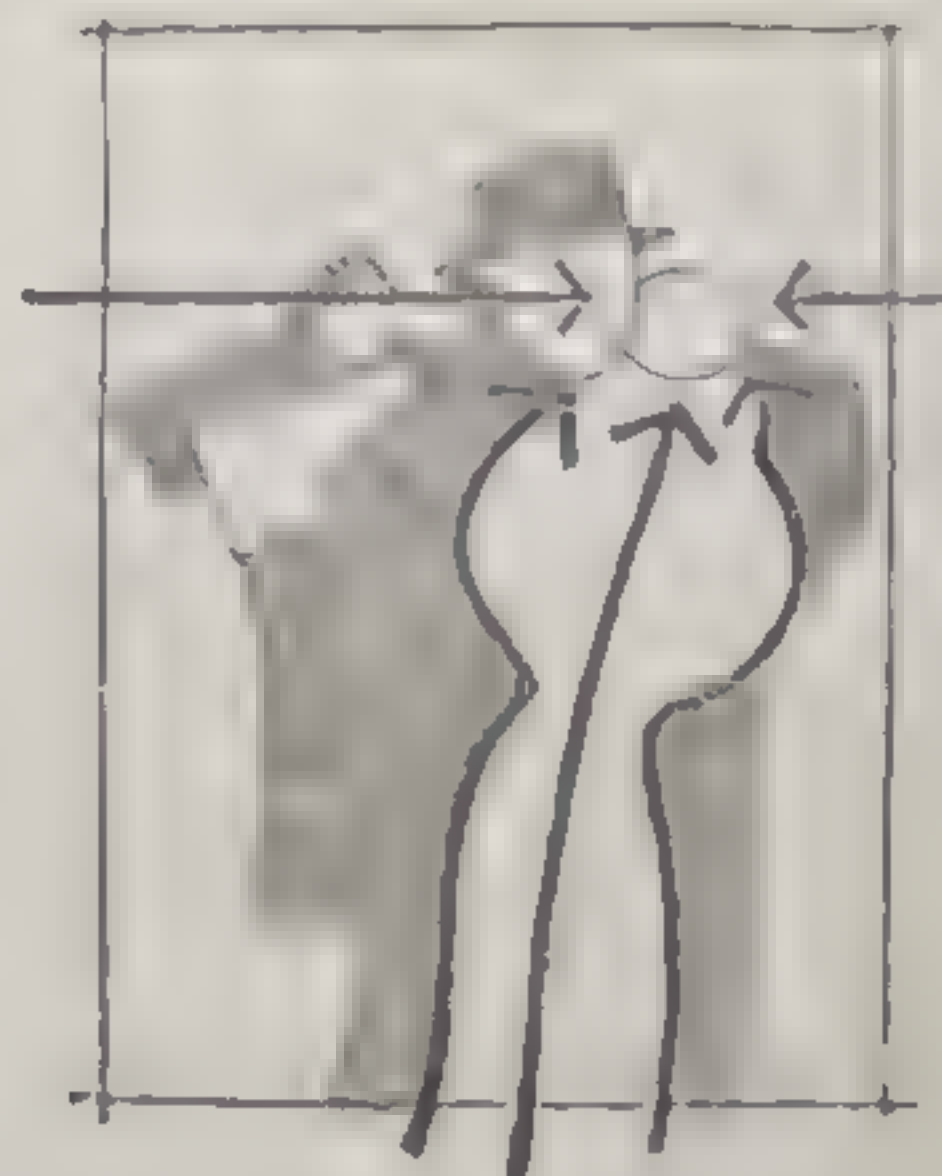
Although the hunter is a small figure, we have no difficulty in seeing him amidst the huge trees. This is because Helck used the lines of the trees and the landscape to guide our eye to the man.

Collection of the Museum of Modern Art
Gift of James Thrall Soby

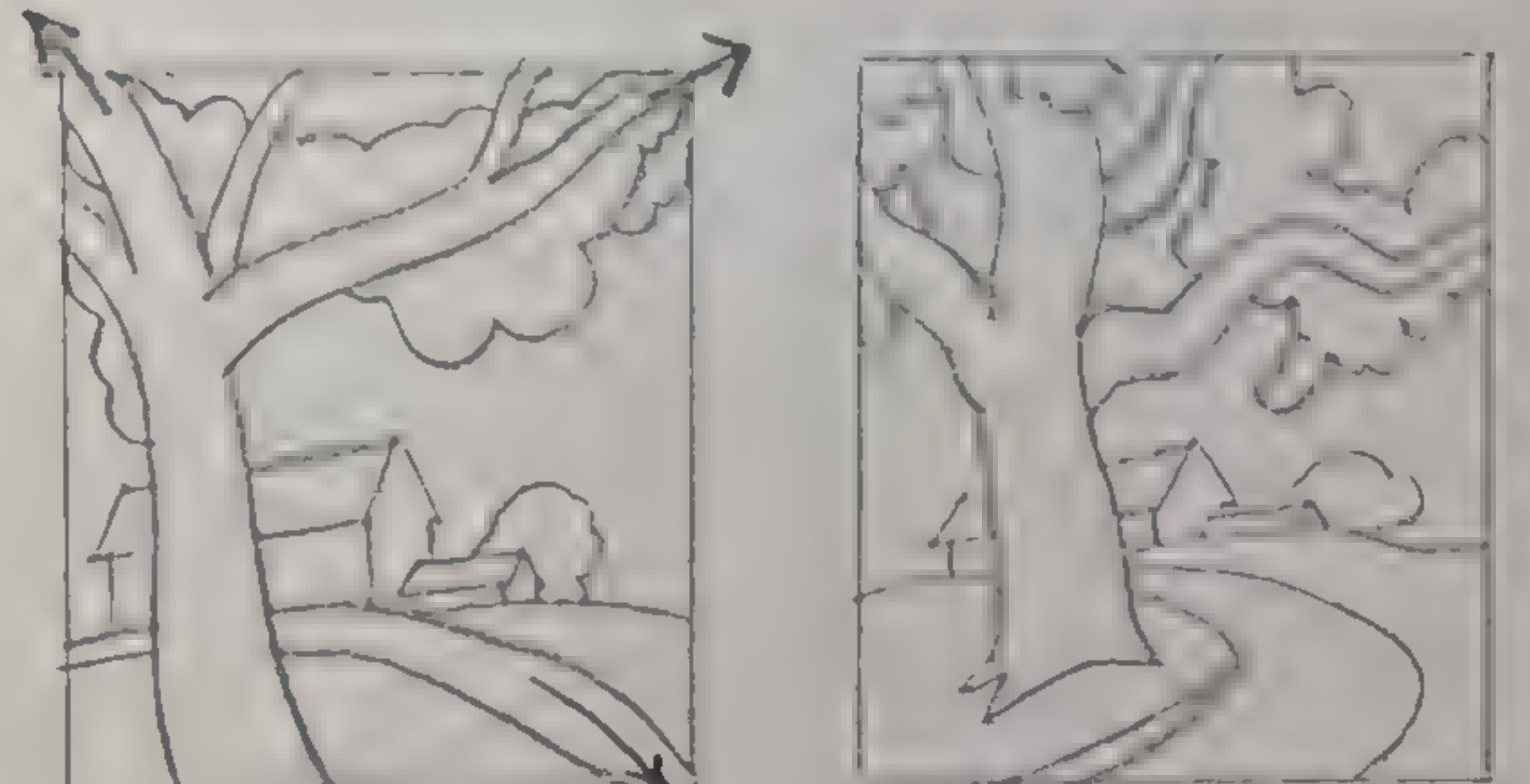


Ben Shahn

The effectiveness of this Ben Shahn picture is due in part to the careful placement of shapes which have directional movement. Note that all three heads are on the same line and our attention is guided toward this line by the background trees. The shawl in which the child is wrapped also leads our eye up to the heads.



Tangents: Don't arrange objects so that a line on one will meet a line on another. They will form a longer line and draw the eye away from the center of interest. In the left diagram the lines at the top of the man's head, at his shoulders and jacket bottom form distracting tangents — which are easily corrected (right) by moving the objects a little.



Picture corners: Picture corners, due to the meeting of the frame lines, are strong and attract attention. Don't let any of a picture's main lines run into corners — as the road, long branch and top of the tree trunk do in the left diagram — or they will lead the eye out of the picture. Plan your lines as at the right to keep the viewer's interest within the picture area.

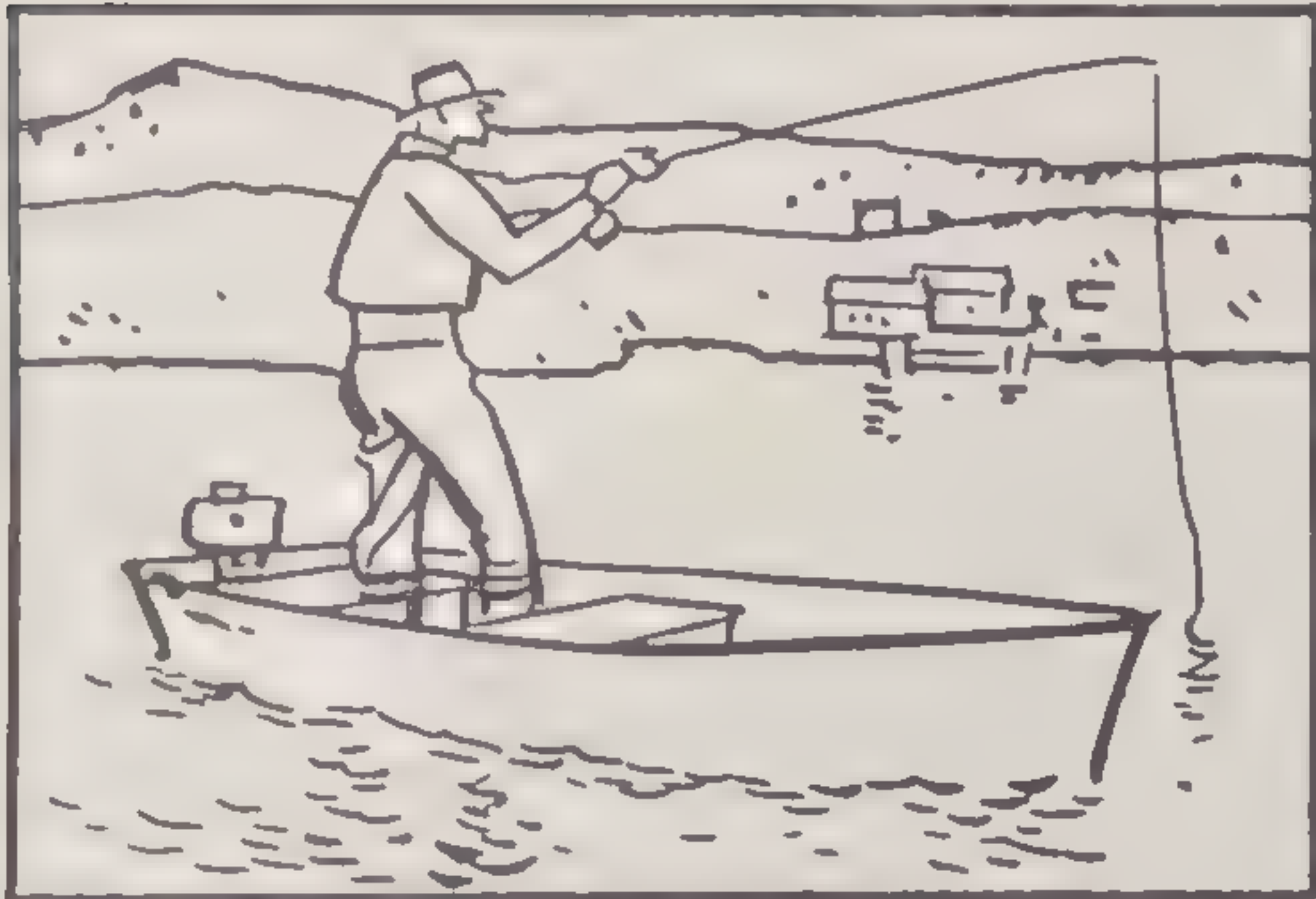
Value

Value — lightness or darkness — is the fourth of the elements of composition. Although last in order, it is by no means last in importance. Like area, depth, and line, value can play a leading part in the making of a picture.

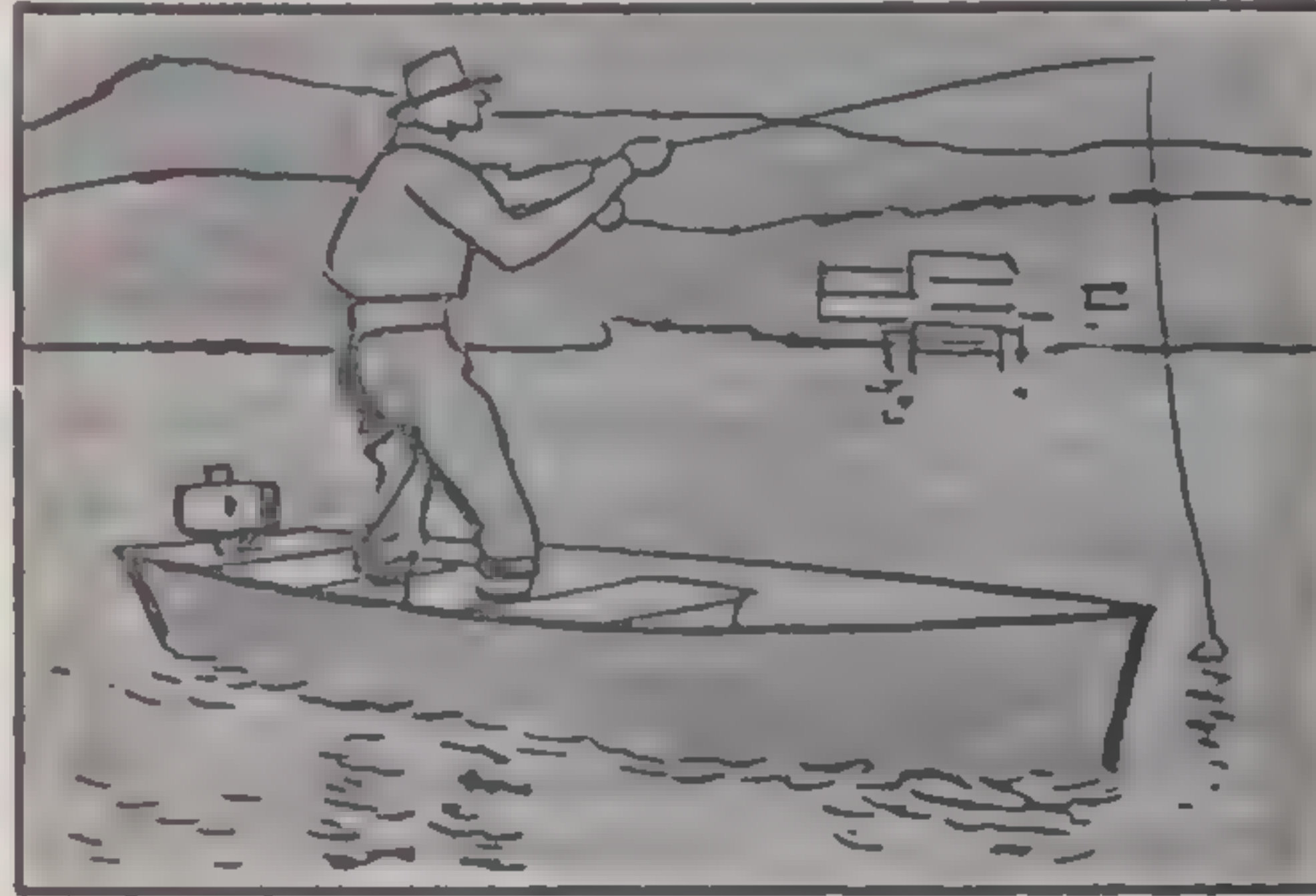
Many pictures have a mood, and a major factor in creating this mood is the over-all value we give the picture — the “key,” as it is frequently called. For example, a picture of a gay picnic or a children’s party should probably be painted light in value, or in a fairly “high key.” But if we wished to paint a scene with a feeling of sadness and despair, we could accentuate this mood by making the picture dark in value or in a “low key.” In a violent fight scene or a picture of a storm we might logically select a wide range of contrasting values ranging from pure white to solid black.

Values should be consistent within a picture, particularly where we use them to set the mood. For example, the over-all effect of the picnic scene might be ruined if part of the picture or some of the figures in it were painted in deep, somber tones, out of key with the rest of the painting. And, similarly, a picture with a mood of dark despair could be weakened by thoughtlessly introducing light or gay tones.

Just as the proper use of line leads our eye to a focal point in a picture, so our eye tends to go to those points where there is the greatest contrast of values. This is because objects become more conspicuous when placed next to a value that contrasts with their own. On the other hand, when an object is surrounded with values that are nearly the same as its own, it is not so likely to attract our attention. Thus our eye is drawn to the black hat on a man standing in front of a pile of snow — but it is not attracted when he moves over and stands in front of a pile of coal. We can use this principle to help focus attention where we want it in a picture.



Here is a picture in which we have applied the composition principles we have learned so far. The elements are well arranged in depth in the picture area and the movement of line is equally satisfactory. Now we are ready to add the consideration of value.



This diagram illustrates a typical problem. Because everything is in a medium tone or tones that are closely related, nothing stands out any more than it did in the drawing to the left. The tones confuse the picture rather than show us what is important in it.



By using different tones we can easily make things contrast with one another. However, now everything seems equally important. The boat and mountain stand out just as sharply as the fisherman. The values are not helping to create a definite center of interest.



By using in-between values of gray we can control the contrast between tones. Now the strongest contrast is where it should be — between the fisherman and his background. The other elements still stand out clearly but are less important in the picture.

Plan with a few simple values

Before you begin to paint, you should always try to decide on a basic value pattern. In general, the basic value plan of most pictures can be reduced to one of the following:

light against dark

dark against light

dark and halftone (in-between tone) against light

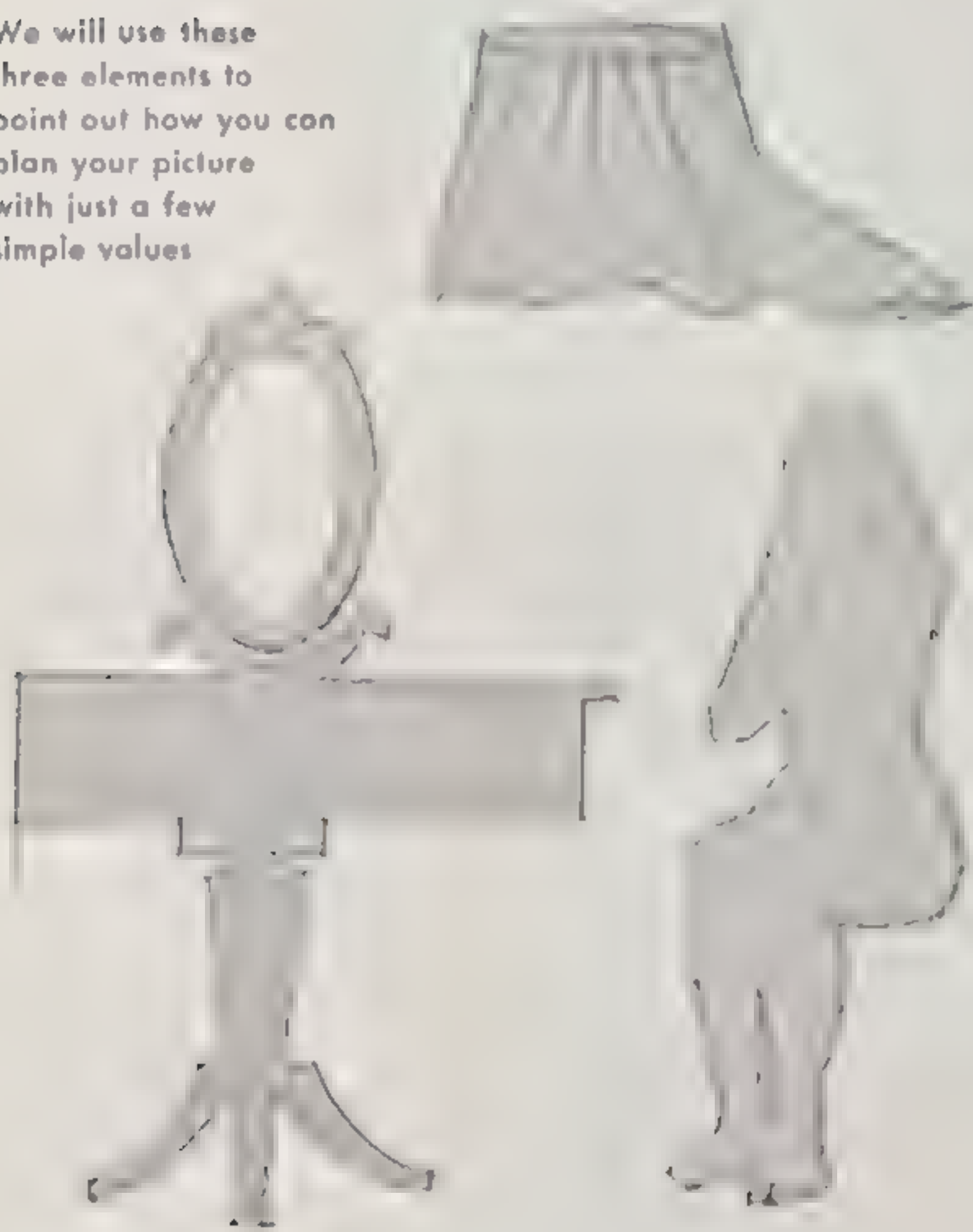
light and dark against halftone

Sometimes these patterns are clear and sharp, and can be recognized at once. Often, however, they are more subtle. The value patterns may be heavily overlaid with texture or made up

of detailed forms that obscure the basic scheme of darks and lights. Still, if you squint at the picture you will see that one of these basic value patterns is there underneath, and that it holds the composition together.

A picture in which the values are not solved in big, simple terms is usually confusing. To avoid this problem, settle on the values of the larger areas of your picture right at the start. A good way to do this is to make small value sketches, much like the illustrations below, so you can quickly try out a number of different value patterns and see which one works best.

We will use these three elements to point out how you can plan your picture with just a few simple values



This is a pattern of dark and halftone against a light background. Because the greatest contrast is between the dressing table and background, the dressing table stands out more than the woman.



In this pattern of dark against halftone, the dressing table remains the dominant element—its large black form still contrasts more strongly with the background than the woman does.



This is a pattern of light and dark against halftone. The figure has been lightened, so that it contrasts more sharply with the background than the dressing table does. There is no question that the figure is the center of interest.



This is a simple pattern of light against dark. Because the dressing table and the figure are the same tone, they work together as a single shape. Notice how different in its effect this pattern is from the one we saw just before.



Here light and dark areas are created by light and shadow. The dark dressing table stands out against the light wall, the light figure against the wall in shadow. This principle of contrasts works well in a picture with strong light and shade.

Creating a center of interest

When we arrange objects in a composition, we must always keep their values in mind. We can make a dark object stand out by putting it next to or in front of a light one. We can make a light object important in a picture by setting it against a dark background. By contrasting the value of one thing with the value of another, we can create a center of interest.

Obviously, the strongest and most attention-getting contrast is achieved by placing the lightest shape in the picture against the darkest one — or vice versa. And, likewise, we can make objects almost indistinguishable by grouping them with others that are closely related in value. Things that are not important to the theme of the picture can be played down in this way. Never allow an accidental use of contrast to draw the viewer's attention

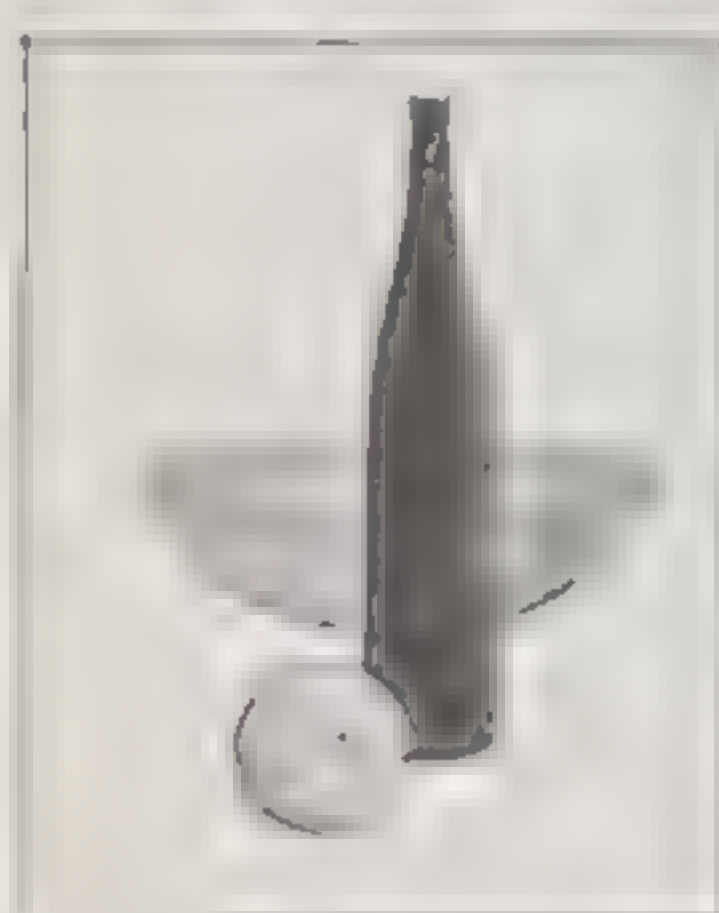
to the wrong place and distort or confuse the picture's message.

To learn how to control values in composition, make some sketches like the still-life demonstrations below. Keep the pictures uncomplicated and, using only three or four simple tones, work for various degrees of contrast. When you add details, don't let them destroy the three or four basic values that make up your picture. By practicing this way, you will soon know how to make the viewer's attention focus where you want it.

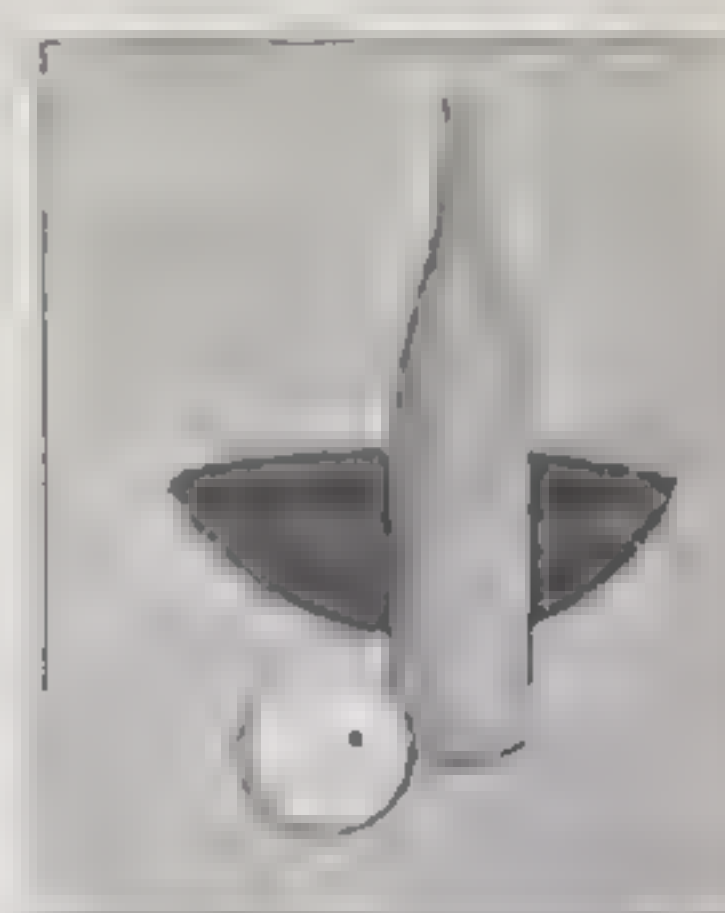
Here we are emphasizing the role of value in creating a center of interest. Don't forget, though, that area, line, and depth can all be used for the same purpose. Usually, you will build your center of interest not just with one, but with all or most of these elements of composition.



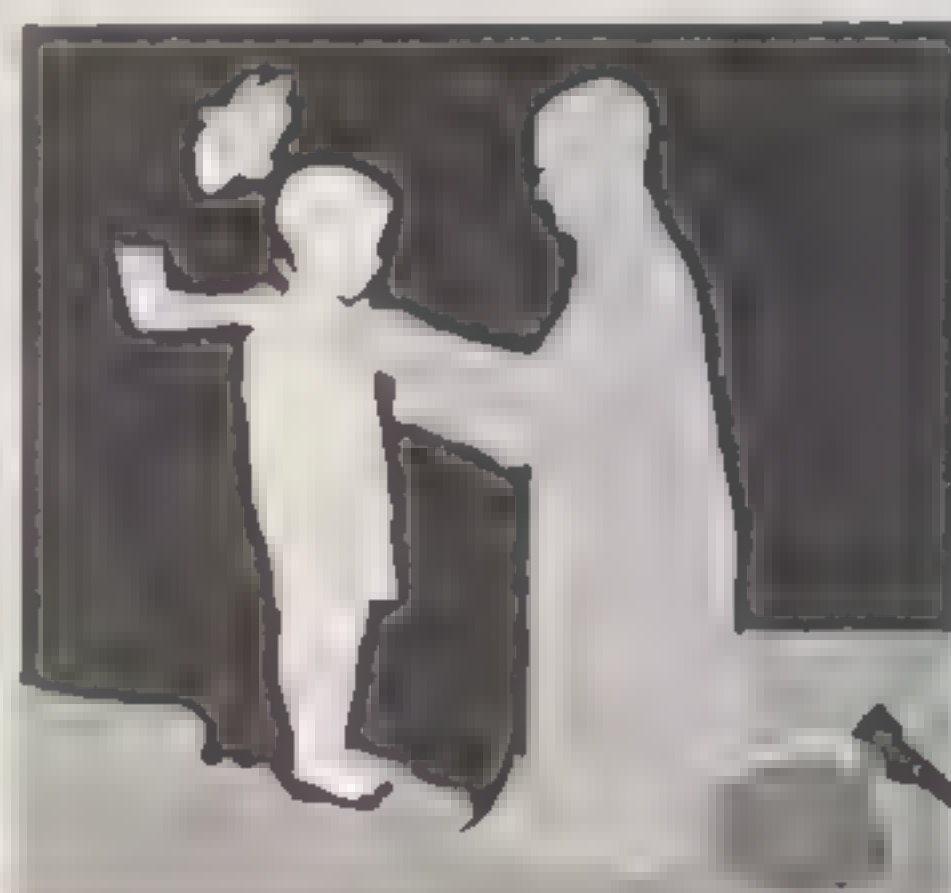
(Left) No object stands out more than any other — they blend into each other and the background. Now let's change some values to create a focal center. (Right) Here the orange contrasts most with the background.



(Left) Now the bottle is the center of interest — it is darkest and contrasts more with background than bowl or orange does. (Right) The bowl stands out because its dark value is most prominent against the halftone background.



Courtesy Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company



This picture by Norman Rockwell provides a fine example of how to control interest by varying value contrast. The boy, with his light suit, is the dominant focal center, the father is second in importance, and the mother has a background position.



The value pattern in this illustration, also by Norman Rockwell, is based on the light and shadow pattern thrown by the lamp in the lower foreground. The strongest contrast is between the boy's shadowy head and gun and the light uniform of the officer. This contrast adds drama to the scene.



Courtesy The Carrier Corporation



Here Robert Fawcett sets a pattern of darks against a light background. Notice, on the man cutting ice in the foreground, how the artist uses contrast to make typical shapes like the hands, saw teeth, and handle stand out so the action will be clear.

Controlling values in a composition

Broadly speaking, there are four ranges of value, or value keys, in which pictures are painted. On this page we show you these keys and the effect created by each.

The middle-key picture is the original illustration here. It was painted by Al Parker, who selected this key because he felt it expressed the mood he wanted. The other pictures show how

the same subject would look in the other keys. Next to each picture a value bar with a bracket indicates the range of values used.

Notice that the relationship of values is consistent in each of these pictures. For example, the girl's dress is always the lightest tone, her black eye one of the darkest. Always choose the key most appropriate to your subject — and stick to it as you paint.



Middle key: No extremes of light or dark.



High key: Over all value very light.



Low key: Over-all value very dark.



Full-value range: The whole range from white to black.

The Circus:

Four variations on a theme

As we have pointed out, compositional devices are basically tools — tools that enable you to express your point of view in pictures. There are no ironclad rules for using these tools; every artist will apply the principles of composition in his own way, and he may apply them differently at different times.

Here we show you the same circus theme from four points of view, painted by Michael Mitchell, a Faculty member. See how, in each variation on the theme, the change in approach or point of view dictated changes in the use of compositional means.



Variation 1

The intention here was to record an impression of a particular scene, viewed at a particular instant in time and with a specific atmosphere. Interest centers around the trio of performers who are waiting to enter the brilliantly lighted arena glimpsed through the tent flap. A dramatic atmospheric effect was created by a flickering illumination coming from this opening. It was heightened by the use of blurred and irregular brushwork in the shadows and crisp touches of impasto on lighted edges.

Even in a strictly representational picture it is the artist's prerogative to edit and rearrange certain elements: objects in scattered positions, like the table and horn, were brought closer to the figures so that they directed attention back to this center, providing at the same time a pleasant foil in size and shape.

These changes were made to accommodate the images to the two-dimensional surface and to make more evident the actual qualities of the scene.

Although it is always possible that there are psychological overtones in the selections made, my aim was to make an objective rather than a subjective statement. In the result I felt I had not consciously departed from nature.



Variation 2

A process of simplifying and clarifying, until the potential action of each shape in the picture is realized, frequently opens up a new range of choices for the artist, while enabling him to retain the basic representational elements and perhaps even strengthen them. For every "optical fact" that is rejected, however, the painter must be ready to substitute a change that is meaningful in the overall composition and true to its spirit.

In this case eliminating accidental details, such as creases in clothing and diffused modeling, enabled me to concentrate interest at certain points. Thus reducing the clown's body to a dark silhouette made it possible to elaborate his head and it also provided a foil for the schematically rounded form of the equestrienne.

Both linear rhythms and value contrasts were manipulated so as to direct interest to a focal point around the heads of the trio. The performers were also kept high in key in order to hold their own against the low-toned but strongly designed background. Even the dappled pattern of spots on the horse was given a horizontal flow returning the eye to the center of interest.

In the finished picture, every element had been forced to play a distinct but contributing role in the overall scheme — a picture with no loose ends.



Variation 3

A particular place or memory of a place often gives rise to subjective fantasy of a kind that is best interpreted in a less representational style. The artist who is thinking nostalgically about the circus is not limited to any one sequence in time or space. His mind is free to move with the tight-rope walker or feed the animals in the back tent. Since no dividing walls exist in his conception, he devises an equally fluid artistic means of rhythmic lines moving across open shapes.

In this version each form is attached to a plane—that is to a division of space which is slab-like and not a fully rounded solid. While indicating the many-sidedness of a form they do not always remain within its boundaries. In the equestrienne the semi-transparent dark plane seems to belong at once to the figure and the space beyond. Linear motifs also play freely across these shapes: the scalloped motif which originates in the circus ring, is carried into the adjoining space and reappears in the curving shoulder blades. Brushwork, too, is used to create subtle passages from one plane to another.

The slanting verticals at the right, suggesting the leaning poles through which everything is seen, typify the purposeful distortions which are neither haphazard nor merely extravagant.



Variation 4

Abstract — “to take out of, to withdraw from, to separate from, to abridge,” this dictionary meaning is understood by almost everyone, until it is applied to painting. The blocks that often develop for the spectator confronted with abstract painting usually spring from his previous conditioning to expect a realistic idiom rather than the emotional expression that is, in fact, intended.

“In the circus everything is movement and excitement; nothing is still!” This thought could inspire in a painter subjectively inclined to such a mood, an expression based on sensation rather than directly on vision. Everything is interpreted in terms of how it feels associatively, rather than how it looks, in an example such as this abstracted interpretation of “circus.” Here each form was given animation, even those objects which are themselves incapable of movement could be used to accentuate motion in other shapes. The playful motif which was abstracted from the clown form was directed toward the ring outside, suggesting its path of movement and in the same way the mesh of lines derived from the table and its objects created a rhythm flowing into the figure.

The sense of being enveloped on all sides, so peculiar to the circus tent, accounts for the festooning shapes at top and side just as the frenzied activity, simultaneously going on in all parts of the arena, suggested the segmented divisions and dynamics of the design.

Fluctuation in value, like every other element, was dictated by the overall rhythmic movement, in a composition in which the note of surprise is uppermost.



ALBERT DORNE. The Yankee Peddler

Only a master of compositional devices could include such a wealth of material in his painting and still maintain clarity of pattern and concentration on the center of interest. The main characters are grouped together in the center of the composition. If you will half-close your eyes, you will see that the remainder of the picture creates a circular frame around them and sets them off. The painting is filled with invisible "sight lines," designed to point toward the central group and thus tie the composition together still more strongly. Every area is made interesting and rewarding visually by the inclusion of carefully studied minor details which help create an authentic setting for the action.





TITIAN
Venus and the Lute Player
Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art



The center of interest in this painting is obviously Venus. Once the artist had established her pose, based essentially on the slow, sensuous curve formed by the lower part of her body, he proceeded to organize the remainder of the painting around her. He grouped the material within three large patterns—the dark shape of the drapery at the upper left, the landscape seen between the drapery, and the remaining area including the figures and the drapery at the right. Within these shapes he integrated an amazing amount of material, utilizing it all so that it directs the eye to the center of interest and at the same time provides a rich, exotic background keyed to bring out the delicate texture and color of the flesh tones.

National Gallery, Oslo



EDVARD MUNCH. Girls on the Bridge (1901)

This fine picture illustrates the approach to area, depth, line, and value that we have been studying. The subject is people and nature. Since the people are observing nature, it seemed logical to make the figures small and allow the scenery to dominate. However, the people are placed prominently in the foreground, where we cannot overlook them. The lines formed by the bridge lead our eye in from the lower left to the figures. The horizontals of the wall and shoreline also direct our attention to the watchers. There is a convincing illusion of depth here, with the lines of the side of the bridge converging as they recede, and the figures overlapping. Munch has made use of a very simple value pattern: dark, middle tone, and light. Each of the figures is painted in a different tone, with the light figure set against darker values. Through careful application of the principles of composition the artist has achieved a very effective and unusual picture organization.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art



DAUMIER. The Washerwoman

This familiar masterpiece sums up many of the compositional devices we have discussed. Consider it first in terms of area. The story here is a story about people; therefore the figures are placed well in the foreground and painted large, so that they dominate the scene. To balance the heavy form of the woman, the wall on the left is made somewhat heavier than the wall on the right. Note the horizontal line in the background—it leads our eye in toward her form. Her right arm is another line of direction leading to the child. The railing also guides our attention to the two figures. Great organizational strength is given the painting through the simple handling of values. Basically, there are three values used—dark, light, and middle. Daumier chose dark for the woman and child—they are almost silhouettes—and set them against a light background, giving them great emphasis. (The dark value underscores the difficult lot of the two people.) The diminishing uprights of the railing as it recedes and the relatively small size of the buildings in the background give the picture a sense of depth.

